

From Utopia to Nightmare:  
National Disillusionment in the Contemporary Nigerian Novel

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines representations of post-independence disillusionment in five contemporary Nigerian novels: *Waiting for an Angel* (2003) by Helon Habila, *Graceland* (2004) by Chris Abani, *Everything Good Will Come* (2005) by Sefi Atta, *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and *City of Memories* (2012) by Richard Ali. Collectively, these novels detail a massive atrocity whose main characteristics are leadership failures, political resistance, ethnic rivalries, and the misery of the common people during the years of military rule in Nigeria from 1966 to 1999. *Waiting for an Angel* and *Graceland* describe the protests of citizens and their oppression by their leaders as the daily productions of the postcolony. *Everything Good Will Come* articulates the place of gender in contemporary Nigeria, and shows a character whose experience is caught between tradition and modernity while her identity is subsumed within the patriarchal powers dominating her home and country. *Half of a Yellow Sun* analyzes the symbolism and implications of the Civil War of 1967-1970, and describes this conflagration as the manifestation of ethnic tensions in the country. *City of Memories* examines the zealous struggle to protect the Nigerian confederacy in spite of the cultural hostilities and blame game among the country's diverse ethnocultural groups.

My analyses of the primary texts address questions such as (i) how does the non-manifestation of the utopian agenda offered by the political and cultural elites prior to independence now symbolize a postcolonial condition? (ii) to what extent does the contemporary novel hold the indigenous leadership accountable for the daily experiences of Nigerians? and (iii) how do Nigerians in the novels interact with each other in relation to their country's contested history and ethnocultural diversity? Each of these texts is a fictionalization of a series of traumatic events that has overtaken the country since independence and has repeatedly left it

dancing on the brink of collapse. The conversations these five novels have with each other over the country's dysfunctional sociopolitical space have not, in my estimation, been adequately investigated. This study thus opens up these dialogues, and draws attention to the exceptionally tragic realities explored in these texts.

My project is urgent at a time when readers and critics are being introduced to a proliferation of conflicting assumptions and ideas that simultaneously invent and misrepresent the crystallization of a Nigerian national consciousness. Besides contributing to existing scholarship on Nigerian literature, this work offers a fresh perspective on the reading of the interaction between the country's postcolonial condition and its literary productions.

## **Dedication**

To Phebe, my wonderful wife, jewel, and inspiration, for her understanding and extreme patience while I pursued my final degree.

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## Map of Nigeria

Adapted from:

<http://www.sitesatlas.com/Maps/Maps/706.gif>



## **Key Events in Nigeria's History**

January 1, 1914—The British Commissioner, Lord Lugard, amalgamated the Southern and Northern Protectorates to form Nigeria.

1954—Nigeria became a federation of three regions (North, East, and West).

October 1, 1960—Nigeria attained independence from Great Britain.

October 1, 1963—Nigeria became a Republic.

January 15, 1966—Nigeria experienced its first military coup, and Prime Minister Abubakar Tafa Balewa was killed.

May 24, 1966—The new military Head of State, Major-General Aguiyi Ironsi, abolished federalism and replaced it with a unitary system of government.

July 29, 1966—Ironsi was killed in a military counter coup.

August 1, 1966—Lieutenant Colonel Yakubu Gowon became the new Head of State, and returned Nigeria to federalism.

May 30, 1967—Lieutenant Colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu proclaimed the secession of the Southeastern region from Nigeria as the Republic of Biafra

July 6, 1967-January 12, 1970—The Nigerian Civil War (or Biafran War).

July 30, 1975—Gowon was overthrown in a military coup and General Murtala Mohammed became the new Head of State.

February 13, 1976—Murtala was killed in a military coup; Lieutenant General Obasanjo replaced him as Head of State.

October 1, 1979—Nigeria returned to a civil rule.

December 31, 1983—The Second Republic was terminated by a military coup, and a series of military leaders ruled Nigeria for the next fifteen years.

May 29, 1999 (to date)—Nigeria returned to a democracy.

## INTRODUCTION

### “TOMORROW LEFT US YESTERDAY”: WRITING DYSTOPIA IN THE THIRD GENERATION NIGERIAN NOVEL

The primary aim of my study is to show the failure of Nigeria’s postcolonial project through five representative twenty-first century Nigerian novels: *Waiting for an Angel* (2003) by Helon Habila, *Graceland* (2004) by Chris Abani, *Everything Good Will Come* (2005) by Sefi Atta, *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and *City of Memories* (2012) by Richard Ali. Written by a group of writers that Pius Adesanmi and Chris Dunton call the third generation (7), these novels are fictional representations of Nigeria’s postcolonial condition. As I explore the evidence of post-independence disillusionment in these texts, I will draw attention to the instances that depict the country as a dystopia, the exact opposite of what was projected by the elites at the time of independence. My discussion will engage with the ways these novels are particularly preoccupied with representing the various manifestations of the mismanagement of power, corruption, ethnic zealotry, and gender imbalance as the bane of the country’s struggle to overcome its dilemma and atrophy.

Prior to independence in 1960, literary productions from Nigeria, and indeed Africa, constituted an act of resistance against colonialism. The period of independence coincided with the process of decolonization that interrogated the concepts of nationhood and national identities. Within the nationalist movement, the sense of hope and cohesion was so strong that the coming years would promise prosperity, but something unexpected happened. First, Nigeria broke along its ethnic fault lines. Second, corruption rapidly crept into the fibre of this emergent nation-state. Consequently, hope vanished as quickly as it was conceived. Disillusionment replaced optimism, fear vanquished trust, betrayal displaced comradeship, and the promise of a glorious future

suddenly turned to a nightmare (see Chukwuemeka et al. 11-12; Tamuno 563-65; and Vaaseh and Ehinmore 215). Unfortunately, according to Bernth Lindfors, “The pre-independence dream of a brave new world [. . .] turned into a nasty postcolonial nightmare” (“Politics” 22). Since then, the country has been struggling to deal with the profoundly negative consequences of national leadership and ethnic strife. The thematic preoccupations of postcolonial Nigerian literature have been dynamic in highlighting these problems, so much so that critics have distinguished contemporary texts from the earlier ones by categorizing the country’s fiction into three generations, as I explain below.

I am aware that periodizing the Nigerian novel by generation is inevitably subject to controversies because this approach cannot provide absolutely clear and accurate boundaries of the different phases of literature. Stylistic, thematic, and ideological overlaps between literary generations can complicate even the most perceptive attempts to delimit the boundaries of these generations. Nevertheless, Adesanmi and Dunton argue that “the generational approach remains one of the cornerstones of literary criticism largely due to the possibilities it offers for a systematic understanding of literary trends and currents synchronically and diachronically” (13). Adesanmi and Dunton maintain that this strategy helps us to appreciate and classify literary works based on the trends and the patterns peculiar to them and the periods they describe. For the two scholars, a generation is not a period of thirty years, but a means to understanding literary commonalities. They clarify this position by asserting that “the writers/artists and intellectuals who are categorized as belonging to a particular generation either fall within a loosely determined age bracket, or are published within a loosely defined timeframe on the one hand, and their themes/tropes are shaped by identifiable events or experiences commonly shared” (13).

This definition will guide my argument throughout this project because it enhances my understanding of the differences among the three generations and the concerns of their texts.

The worldviews of the members of the first, second, and third generations were/are shaped by the existential plagues of their times. Adesanmi and Dunton note that the writers belonging to the first two generations “were mostly born during the first five decades of the twentieth century when the colonial event was in full force. Their textualities were [. . .] massively overdetermined by that experience” (14). The first generation, in particular, was concerned with the dream of Nigeria as a nation (i.e. one indivisible entity) in the making. Its grand project was a sustained remapping of Nigeria’s history in order to delegitimize colonialism and refute the European narratives of stereotypes (as portrayed in Joyce Cary’s *Mister Johnson*) about Africa. Notable members of this generation are Amos Tutuola (fiction), Wole Soyinka (drama), Hubert Ogunde (drama), Chinua Achebe (fiction), Ibrahim Tahir (fiction), Flora Nwapa (fiction), T.M. Aluko (fiction), John Pepper Clark-Bekederemo (drama and poetry), Christopher Okigbo (poetry), Cyprian Ekwensi (fiction), and Elechi Amadi (fiction). As we see in Tutuola’s *Palmwine Drinkard*, Amadi’s *The Concubine*, and Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, for example, the works of the first generation tend to invoke and celebrate Africa’s pastoralism, and show how the colonial incursion eroded it. While Tutuola’s and Amadi’s texts are not necessarily colonial fiction, they locate their settings within bucolic spaces that preceded the coming of the white man as depicted in *Things Fall Apart*.

The consciousness of the second generation was dominated by the idea that the process of nation building was desecrated by the general attitude of the people and the series of ethnic hostilities that exploded immediately after independence, thereby exposing the country as “an

amalgam of peoples welded together in the interests and for the benefit of a European power” (Forsyth 3). Members of the second generation were born late “into the colonial event but their formative years were shaped by independence and its aftermath of disillusionment and stasis” (Adesanmi and Dunton 14). Tanure Ojaide (poetry), Femi Osofisan (drama), Niyi Osundare (poetry), Ben Okri (fiction), Festus Iyayi (fiction), Odia Ofeimum (poetry), Tayo Olafioye (fiction and poetry), Wale Okediran (fiction), Zainab Alkali (fiction), and Buchi Emecheta (fiction) belong to this group. Most of them had followed the nationalist leaders into independence, and were shocked by how quickly the country derailed after the attaining of self-rule in 1960. As illustrated in the writings of Olafioye and Emecheta, for instance, the second generation writers denounce the colonial rule, and mock the Nigerian leaders for subjecting the country to hostilities and political vices so early in its existence as a sovereign nation-state.

Members of the third generation were born mostly after 1960 (Adéèkó 11), “and thus [are] excised from personal history of colonial event” (Adesanmi and Dunton 15). Aside from Adichie, Abani, Atta, Ali, and Habila, other members of this generation include Biyi Bandele (fiction and drama), Dulue Mbachu (fiction), Uzodinma Iweala (fiction), Nike Adesuyi (poetry), Olu Oguibe (poetry), Akin Adesokan (fiction), and many others. Their writings “are massively overdetermined by the politics of identity in a multicultural and transnational frame,” and they remap “the tropes of Otherness and subalternity” by “questioning erstwhile totalities such as history, nation, gender, and their representative symbologies” (Adesanmi and Dunton 15). These writers easily focus their attention on the postcolonial present in Nigeria because they have no personal attachment to the colonial process. Their works complicate the history of the country. While the second generation novel does express disenchantment with the Nigerian government for failing to consolidate the goals of self-rule, it is not nearly as determined as the current

generation to create actual individual characters that embody the suffering, disappointment, and frustrations of the ordinary people. In this case, the contemporary novels show a much wider disconnect between the people and their leaders, hence an indication that the country's problems are increasingly worsening.

For these authors, the post-independence period was a tomorrow in which everything, in line with the nationalist agenda, was supposed to be sweet and pleasant. But after coming of age and realizing that that future has constantly failed to materialize, the third generation writers turn to literature to express their disappointment. The use of literature to express the frustrations of Nigerians began with second generation poetry if one considers the Marxist ideology of Niyi Osundare and Femi Osofisan to which Adesanmi and Dunton allude in their essay (15). The late Tayo Olafioye, a contemporary of Osundare and Osofisan, seems to be laying the groundwork for third generation writers when he encapsulates the general attitude in their novels in his collection of short stories, *Tomorrow Left Us Yesterday*. In this seminal text, Olafioye portrays the pessimism in Africa, as a whole, and in Nigeria, in particular. His overall objective is to depict a Nigeria in trouble because the country has long been deserted by the future the ordinary citizen craves or the one that the Nigerian writer imagines and hopes will come to fruition. In his analysis of the collection, J.O.J. Nwachukwu-Agbada argues that in "the paradoxical title of this volume of prose tales, *Tomorrow Left Us Yesterday*, 'us' refers to fellow nationals, whose future has been mortgaged by pretentious leaders who claim to be patriots, those he [Olafioye] once called 'looters' and later 'idiots' in his poetry" (125). Nwachukwu-Agbada states that Olafioye demonstrates his awareness of the problems in his country, and refuses to pretend that the present and the future hold any promise for his fellow citizens. One of the stories in this collection is "I Die Because of You." In it, Olafioye takes on Islamic/religious extremism, and he sums up his

frustration when he laments that “our behaviour has been a disappointment to decency and what we profess to believe,” declaring that “we are going to pay dearly for it because the tomorrow we look forward to left us yesterday” (123). He bases his conviction on the political realities, corruption, religious conflicts, and ethnic bigotry in the country. Even though this pessimism may sound extreme, it foregrounds the displeasure of the characters in the third generation novels.

Interestingly, the contemporary novelists join Olafioye to mourn the collapse of Nigeria’s utopia in its conception. In their aesthetic representations of the post-independence period, these writers are preoccupied with the socio-political vicissitudes that trouble the country *ad infinitum*. For them, building a cohesive nation-state was a sacred trust that was made in the decade of hope, just before independence. Their literary predecessors may have written stories of disappointment, but these younger writers express their frustrations at the idea of the country being a violated and defiled body, thereby depicting Nigeria as a postcolonial dystopia and chasm that is repeatedly haunted by the endless whims and caprices of the entire ruling class. The period between 1985 and 1995, in particular, is crucial because it was “the decade that saw the emergence and domestic consolidation of [. . . the new] generation” of Nigerian poets (Adesanmi and Dunton 8). However, this group of writers did not blossom until the year 2000. In their discussion of third generation writing from Nigeria, Adesanmi and Dunton stress the visible presence of poetry from the late 1990s up to the early part of the twenty-first century. My understanding is that even though fiction emerged more recently, it has grown stronger and more prominent than poetry since the beginning of the twenty-first century.



Many of the members of this generation live overseas, where they fictionalize their personal experiences or those of other helpless Nigerians caught in the country's complexities. These writers demonstrate their awareness and understanding of the conditions of the country whose citizens consistently languish under social, economic, political, and cultural turmoil. This point is evident in many of the third generation novels, especially the ones examined in this study. Based on my reading of these works, I define the postcolonial condition of contemporary Nigeria as consisting of massive infrastructural failures, poverty, violence, insecurity, anguish, fear, hopelessness, and anger, including the banality of oppressively selfish politics that is synonymous with corruption, kleptomania, and the lack of accountability (see Osofisan 4). It is, therefore, not surprising that the contemporary fiction is full of characters that are disenchanted with the country's political leadership. The third generation novel exposes the failures of the country's civilian and military rulers to accede to the common good of the people.

Unlike their predecessors, Habila, Abani, Atta, Adichie, and Ali refuse to fix their gaze on colonialism and to make excuses for the country's current problems on the basis of its colonial experience. That being said, the disinclination of these authors to focus on the colonial legacy does not mean that they justify or legitimize the colonial rule that set Nigeria on its fractured path. Although a clear understanding of the major preoccupations of the novels requires a brief recollection of past events in colonial and post-independence Nigeria, the tension between the country and its colonial period has been explored so much that doing so again in this work would be irrelevant to the direction I am taking. Nevertheless, in my discussion of Nigeria as a failed postcolonial project, I align my interest with the five writers discussed in this work in examining the problems that describe the country's post-independence era.

Underlying the principal objective of this study, therefore, is the argument that third generation Nigerian novels read the social and political problems in post-independence Nigeria as the ambiances of a dystopia. In his review of Habila's *Waiting for an Angel*, Nduka Otiono identifies two of the "historic experiences [that] have continued to dominate the consciousness of contemporary Nigerian writers — both caused by military political adventurers. The first is the Nigerian Civil War of the 1960s and the second, the reign of military dictatorship, especially in the 1990s" (70). My reading of these texts suggests that these contemporary writers are familiar with the history of the country. Therefore, their novels are connected mainly by the similar subjects they anatomize, and by the fact that they unmask Nigeria's alternation between life and death, drawing attention to the leadership errors that perpetually undermine the abilities of Nigerians to effectively position their country on a stable path. Through these texts, my study complicates the idea of Nigeria by constructing the federation as a dystopic space that reflects the social chasms plaguing it from within. I am careful not to read the third generation novels as primarily historical accounts of post-independence Nigeria, for to do so would be tantamount to ignoring in the texts what, in "Half and Half Children," Jane Bryce perceptively describes as the "powerfully evocative and convincing fictional dramas of individual characters set against realist renderings of a particular time and place" (54). Instead, I am interested in examining the degree to which these narratives fictionalize the mammoth failure of the Nigerian nation-state to rise above its overwhelming sociopolitical paralysis and deal with the general sense of disillusionment precipitated by the collapse of the postcolonial project and broken promises.

Keeping in mind the concerns and dissatisfaction of the first two generations, this dissertation pursues the path of the contemporary novels by interrogating the mode in which the third generation fiction represents classism, ethnic discord, and military adventurism as evidence

of the challenges/inabilities of the Nigerian population to realize their utopia. The contemporary texts I have chosen to treat represent the themes of patriotism, gender, and ethnicity differently. Yet, and most importantly, I am inspired by how they open up a discussion over the incoherent postcolonial space of Nigeria and the experiences of the destitute inhabiting it. Noticeable in the struggles of the common people living in the liminal spheres in these texts are the serious effects of the failures of post-independence military and political leaders. The events described in these works provide the mental picture of the socio-economic collapse of the country and a culmination of its political catharsis.

Choosing these texts allows me to extrapolate a new way to (re)configure Nigeria and to map out what has happened since the first two generations of writers expressed their views about the country. Aside from being defined by its social critiques of post-independence Nigeria, the third generation novel is a revolt against the widespread social injustice that was prevalent in the country, which led the common people to agonize under the behaviors of military/civilian regimes. In her assessment of the thematic preoccupations of the third generation novelists, Bryce asserts that “there is no doubt that underlying the [contemporary] novels is a protest against *what Nigeria has become*” (58, emphasis mine). Bryce shows that the promise of the history of the country and the promise of a utopia are not strangers to these writers. So, her observation implies that these texts demonstrate their acute awareness of the transition the country has made from the political deficiencies recorded in the works of the first two generations to the delinquent attitude of the leaders who have been ruling the country since 1960. This new identity portrays Nigeria as an entity which Adélékè Adéèkó calls “a lawless outpost of modern sensibilities” (qtd. in Bryce 58) that is “ruled by corrupt self-seeking elite” (Bryce 58). Here is, therefore, an unmistakable area of convergence between the third generation novel and

its counterparts in the first and second generations. Whereas social critiques marked by ardent protests and risky intervention are obvious in the contemporary Nigerian novel, the narratives of counter-discourse are common in earlier texts, especially the works of the first generation (see Adesanmi and Dunton).

My discussion, not surprisingly, is framed by postcolonial literary theory.

Postcolonialism is often constructed as a framework for determining the demarcation between the end of colonialism and its aftermath. This notion fails to consider the fact that the postcolonial experience continues to unfold and assume different configurations in the postcolony (see Ashcroft et al., "General Introduction"). This perspective suggests that the enigma of Nigeria's nationhood/identity and the dynamics of postcolonial theory converge within Nigerian literary productions. Besides, this claim inevitably generates three cogent questions. First, for whom does the Nigerian postcolonial text speak? Second, does it speak for everyone in the country or just for a particular group? Third, how are all the disparate elements coerced into one country by colonialism represented as a unit in texts like Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Tahir's *The Last Imam*, or Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*? I have observed that most Nigerian novels often represent the country's reality and past nationalist movement only in relation to men, a pattern Elleke Boehmer also identifies in colonialist literature (*Colonial* 216). From the foregoing discussion, and as I will argue later, it is impossible to homogenize the definition of postcolonial discourse because not only does the theory keep evolving, but also the experiences it speaks to are constantly being redefined by new and changing events in the postcolony.

As a form of representation, literature does not need to be historically accurate in order to be effective. In its mimicry of the happenings in the public sphere, literature promulgates the social and political predicament of the people. Literature is not equivalent to truth, but it constructs itself close to reality so much that the reader can connect the issues raised in a text to regional and universal contexts. In this regard, Femi Osofisan, for one, has argued that literature must address the socio-political problems of the day, including “the abuse of power, widespread poverty and squalor, kleptomania and corruption in the public life, the suffering of the common people, and so on” in order to be worthwhile (4). Osofisan believes that literature is validated by its engagement with the current issues that shape prominent discourses in a social, political, and cultural milieu. This position is rooted in the notion that the function of a literary text is not to state facts, but to reflect the society, in addition to educating and entertaining the reader. Even though he initially generalizes his view, Osofisan later focuses his discussion on contemporary writings from Nigeria, arguing that the events they describe are contextualized by the exact circumstances pervading the polity. In doing this, the texts underscore the fact that the reader must be reasonably well informed about the political and social discourses on the fictional representations of Nigeria. Otherwise, one might wrongfully locate the situations in the country within the purview of a completely different environment.

To achieve such an objective, contemporary Nigerian novelists invite the reader to intellectually explore the social terrain that traps the ordinary citizen in the post-independence conundrum. My discussion of their writings is essentially propelled by these fundamental questions: (i) in what ways do the writers help us to understand the current identity of Nigeria? and (ii) who or what should be held accountable for the country’s debacle? Upon interacting with the texts, the reader is then confronted with two more questions: (i) how does the impasse in the

texts represent real-life conflict? and (ii) what solution do the writers propose for the problems they describe? The novels consider these questions in different ways. My contention is that they collectively redefine the postcolonial identity of Nigeria, and illustrate the shift from a literary enterprise that privileges a counter discourse and the project of looking back to the pre-colonial era.

In examining these works in line with this argument, I have organized my dissertation around six chapters. Chapter One discusses the evolution of Nigeria as a nation-state, and offers a brief history of key events in the country from the colonial period to the present. The purpose is to contextualize the questions the selected novels raise about Nigeria. Chapter Two presents a detailed historical overview of modern Nigerian literature, noting the influence of the colonial encounter on its early themes. I argue that the primary concern of the early writers, such as Achebe, Aluko, and Soyinka, was to make a political statement to the West, and to insist that Nigerians—and indeed Africans—had enough dignity to govern themselves as they reveled in the idea of pan-Africanism. This chapter recognizes the symbiotic relation between the novel and the notion of nation, and explains the reasons that the former, as a literary form, is regarded as the most popular genre that depicts the prevalent realities in Nigeria. It also shows that while the concepts of the novel, nation, and nationalism were transported to Nigeria via the local elite's encounter with Western education, these concepts, especially nation(alism), have been redefined since then in order to accommodate the ambitions/principles of regional/ethnic struggles. The method adopted toward this path is to examine how early modern Nigerian writers mobilized the novel as a key player in the emergence and circulation of the country's post-independence identity. As well, this chapter complicates the idea of a Nigerian national literature as both a

symbol of unity and a feasible model to discuss the experiences of the people in such a pluri-national state.

Additionally, the chapter argues that as a literary theory, postcolonialism cannot—and should not—be studied as a demarcation between the colonial period and the post-independence experiences of the former colonies, including Nigeria. As I theorize the postcolonial as a literary marker, I contend that literature is constantly in a state of flux, and that societies change, thereby generating new themes in the texts that reflect the experiences of their peoples. Noted in my explanation is the difficulty and impracticability of the definition of postcolonial literature as a homogenized unit of the experiences of postcolonial subjects. This chapter further discusses the periodization of the Nigerian novel with a view to explaining how the social and political events of each of the three generations influence their thematic preoccupations. My discussion focuses on the third generation, identifying it as a literary phase that redefines the postcolonial identity of Nigeria as a contested space into which multiple meanings are repeatedly projected.

Chapter Three examines two novels, Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel* and Chris Abani's *Graceland*, and explores the experiences of ordinary Nigerians and the consequences of the long years of military dictatorships. Through their main characters, Habila and Abani complicate the power relations between Nigerian leaders and the “powerless.” Employing Achille Mbembe's theorization of government in the postcolony, Cameroon to be precise, as “the banality of power” (3), I argue that the protagonists are victims of despotic regimes that delight in oppressing their subjects and staging sadistic violence on their bodies. By examining several instances of this banality in both novels, I show that Habila's and Abani's central motifs are fascinating fictionalizations of the country's postcolonial fright and grievous critiques of Nigeria

for degenerating into the exact opposite of the balanced community that the people had anticipated before independence. The chapter concludes that the exile option and remedies these writers seek to their protagonists' dilemmas inevitably complicate their own attitudes toward the malaise in the country.

Chapter Four discusses the experiences of women in contemporary Nigeria by exploring the portrayal of complex gender relations and masculinized state power in Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come*. Using the theory of postcolonial feminism and its representation in the text, this chapter demonstrates that the elite Nigerian woman is an ambivalent figure because she is caught between tradition and modernity. She lays claim to freedom, yet she is hampered by the practices of patriarchal politics in a politically dystopic space. Worse still, she experiences the postcolonial condition as both a restricted woman and an ordinary citizen whose plight draws no significant attention from the oppressive society in which she is located and the *male* texts, as well as real-life practices, that often isolate her. Also, whereas the men regularly dominate the political and public spaces, they are obsessed with the idea of restricting women to the private and personal spheres, which silence them and conceal their experiences. This attitude and its mode of representation in men's texts significantly generate and drive the conflict in Atta's novel, especially in the relationship between the main character, Enitan, and her father on the one hand, and between her and her husband on the other. Through Enitan, I maintain that Atta suggests that women's attempts to navigate the hostile sociopolitical terrain of Nigeria face strong opposition from patriarchy and political crises. This chapter recognizes the freshness Atta brings to discussing the plight of women in the country, and notes that she elevates the argument of Nigerian feminist critics and writers, whose thoughts congregate in *Africa Wo/man Palava* by



Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, that the experiences of Nigerian citizens cannot, and must not, be gendered as men's *thing* alone (6-7).

Chapter Five examines *Half of a Yellow Sun* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. This novel further complicates the identity of Nigeria through its narration of the Civil War. Aside from problematizing the history of Nigeria as a cohesive political entity, *Half of a Yellow Sun* dramatizes the anxieties that overwhelm the diverse groups coerced into this nation-state as evidence of the failures of the country's indigenous leaders to resist and discourage ethnic tension. The events of the war, as portrayed in the novel, support the thesis that the country is a mere geography inhabited by diverse ethnic groups that have little or nothing in common. The purpose of this chapter is to read Biafra, the setting of the war in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, as a desired alternative to Nigeria by the characters Adichie depicts as victims of bloodshed, and to also illuminate the quashed determination of a major ethnic group to exist separately as a sovereign entity. Rather than interpret this text as a war story, I read it as a catastrophic explosion of ethnic discord and a dramatization of the failures of the different ethnic groups in Nigeria to coexist peacefully without acceding to the pressure of bitter rivalries. This chapter brings to the fore the very idea that Nigeria remains a colonialist experiment that is still trying to figure out how the culturally different elements within its territory could afford to share a common identity and consciousness.

Chapter Six engages with Richard Ali's *City of Memories* as both a reaction to the singular story of a traumatic experience depicted in *Half of a Yellow Sun* and an ongoing struggle over the existence of the Nigerian federation. This novel represents the war and the prelude to it from the perspective of a Northern writer, thereby providing readers of Nigerian fiction an opportunity to reconsider their previous interactions with experiences of Igbo people who have

always been considered the victims of the Civil War. Focusing on the experience and struggle of Colonel Ibrahim Dibarama to keep the country united, the chapter describes a different idea of Nigeria, which does not correlate with the one portrayed in Adichie's novel. My aim here is to ensure that my project has a Northern representation whose experiences and views should be measured in line with the existing stories of killings that have mostly been produced so far from the sympathizers and/or victims of the Civil War. In following this path, the chapter deviates from reading *City of Memories* as a love story because such interpretation is too peripheral in view of the trajectory of this dissertation. In my engagement with the response of Ali's novel to the narrative of *Half of a Yellow Sun*, I underscore the fundamental point that the crises in the two texts are signs of Nigeria's trauma and endless struggles to survive as a cohesive country.

Finally, the Conclusion recapitulates the concerns of the novels and the commitment of this dissertation. I reiterate that all the primary texts examined in my study are literary constructs that attempt to suggest a geopolitical space that is better than the country. Citing the setting of each work, I assert that while the novelists' choice to write regional narratives highlights Nigeria's heterogeneity, it ultimately also confirms the absence of a truly national literature in the country.

## CHAPTER ONE

### NIGERIA: THE GENESIS AND EVOLUTION OF AN IDEA

In this chapter, I will trace the origin and evolution of the country we now know as Nigeria with a view to providing the necessary background to my primary texts. The account offered here serves as a prelude to my engagement with the ideas of ethnicity, nation, and national literature explored in the next chapter, which inform my whole study. My discussion aims to contextualize my readings of the concerns embedded in the texts examined in this work. The connection between Nigerian history and literature is so strong that most times the latter seems to be taken as a re-articulation of the events documented by the former. Even though literature and history are not the same, they tend to corroborate each other whenever they address similar subjects. As a fledgling postcolonial critic, I believe it is important to interact with history in order to understand the sociopolitical operation of the text and the ideological perspectives and interests of the writer. The challenge, however, is that reading literature as if it were history can lead one to miss the creativity that generates exciting literary discourses. Since the themes of the next chapters—indeed of the whole project—are the dysfunctionality, postcolonial condition, and convoluted image of Nigeria, a relatively brief history of the country is critical to my discussion of the preoccupations of contemporary Nigerian literary productions.

Arguably, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Nigeria has been one of the most internally troubled creatures of the colonial era. The invention of the idea of Nigeria as “a mere geographical expression” is credited to Chief Obafemi Awolowo, one of the country’s foremost nationalists. Awolowo’s famous quote emphasizes the problem with the formation of a state that has never been united since the beginning and end of colonialism (Hill 1). The lack of unity in post-independence Nigeria is a vestige of the framework that British colonial rulers, especially

Lord Lugard, designed for the country. The divide and rule strategy he orchestrated was intended to suppress mutiny against his administration. Today, saying that Nigeria is a fusion of disparate elements has become a cliché that only serves the purpose of remembering what error the British committed in bringing such strange bedfellows into one geopolitical space. The idea of Nigeria and the “concept of a Nigerian national identity are British creations without indigenous roots” (Cunliffe-Jones 73). In fact, the name “Nigeria” was invented by Flora Shaw—later Lady Lugard—a strong proponent of the spread of British civilization and trade mission in India, Canada, and Africa. In *Flora Shaw (Lady Lugard)*, E. Moberly Bell offers a comprehensive account of Shaw’s exploits during colonialism and her relationship with the man who exercised a mandate to make a country out of a significantly huge part of sub-Saharan Africa (Campbell 1-2; Cumpston 72-73). Shaw was writing for *The Times* of London when she coined “Nigeria” from her play on words on the River Niger (Cunliffe-Jones 73; Campbell 1-2; and Hill 1). She married Lord Lugard in June 1902 when he was the High Commissioner of the Northern Protectorate. Writing on January 8, 1897, she proposed and used the word “Nigeria” as a reference for a community of peoples living in the Niger area. In *Ghosts of Empire*, Kwasi Kwarteng reinforces Frederick Schwarz’s observation when he notes the personal conviction with which Shaw thought the name she invented would be a general description for the “agglomeration of pagan and Mohameddan states which have been brought [. . .] within the confines of a British Protectorate, and thus need for the first time in their history to be described as an entity by some general name” (Schwarz 20). Schwarz remarks that “Nigeria” was invented by Shaw when she was writing about the region that is now Northern Nigeria. The name stuck, serving to this day as a seal on the coercion of different ethnic groups under the British colonial rule.

The diverse ethnocultural groups that constitute present-day Nigeria, or, in fact Africa as a whole, would have likely developed differently had European colonialism not existed or had it not brought under one government peoples who were separately forming their own kingdoms, caliphates, and states. Did it matter to the British if those nations were not willing to live together? No, it did not. In his seminal book, *My Nigeria: Five Decades of Independence*, Peter Cunliffe-Jones, whose family participated in the perpetuation of the colonial legacy in Africa, is critical of the role British officers played in the birth of Nigeria. Cunliffe-Jones insists that had the British not created one country in Nigeria, “six or seven countries would have emerged” from this region if the primordial setting of the Africans had not been altered in the interest of Europe (44). The Igbo, Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, Edo, and the other groups could have fashioned different countries with better intergovernmental relations. In its most unapologetic demonstration of disrespect toward the cultures, interests, and humanity of Africans, British colonialism created Nigeria without any input from the groups that would live there as its citizens. Nation building was not Lugard’s aim. Nation building was not what he was asked to do in Nigeria (Cunliffe-Jones 73). A South-North unity would not help his cause at all. So, Lugard was fine as long as the country he formed from different languages, histories, and religions was divided. This is the reason Cunliffe-Jones contends that, “while Nigeria was born as one country, one colony, it would not be one nation” (74). This assertion implies that rather than establish a “real” country, conquest, imperialism, and expanding British control in the world were more pertinent objectives of colonialism for creating Nigeria.

Colonialism is synonymous with annihilation, oppression, and subjugation. In Nigeria, it encouraged native solidarity and divisions for its own selfish gains so much that the country is now a template for reading a heterogeneous space that is riddled with confusion and an

unstoppable search for a national identity. Contrary to what one often hears, there was/is no pre-colonial Nigeria. Colonialism began officially in Nigeria in 1914, but the groups fused into the country had been individually conquered and administered separately by British officers for many years before that time. Today's Nigeria is a crystallization of three main ethnic groups—Yoruba, Hausa, and Igbo—that have little or nothing in common in terms of language, culture, and political orientation. Subsumed within these groups are other sub-groups that had existed as different states and governed independently of each other well before the Berlin Conference of 1884-85, after which “the British found themselves caught up in [the drive that is popularly known as] the ‘Scramble for Africa’” (Falola and Heaton 86). Before the advent of colonialism, these groups had trade relations, and were also influenced by commercial interactions with European and the slave trade. By the time Lord Lugard annexed the South and North with the Colony, Lagos, in 1914, he was less concerned about the differences among them.

The North is known for its Islamic heritage that resulted from the Fulani *jihad* launched in 1804 by the Islamic legend Usman Dan Fodio. The outcome of this movement was the forceful integration of “most parts of Hausaland and portions of so-called ‘pagan’ groups of the Middle Belt region” into the Sokoto Caliphate (Osaghae 2). One of the implications of the *jihad* was the domination of the non-Muslim elements by Islamic adherents working vigorously toward the Islamization of the entire North (see Falola and Heaton; Osaghae). The attempts of the non-Muslim states, especially in the Niger-Benue area, to free themselves from Islamic influence were not successful, and were often met with deadly consequences. The colonialists immediately benefited from this conquer and rule strategy because it had already set in motion the medium through which they would later construct their indirect rule policy (Reynolds 601). To effect this policy, the colonial authorities sanctioned “appointees of the Caliphate and the

Emirates,” and imposed them “as rulers on the non-Muslim groups” (Osaghae 2). There was little resistance against colonial domination in Hausaland because the British took advantage of the remarkably centralized and hierarchical political system that had long been established by the indigenous people in the region.

Occupying the West of Nigeria are the Yorubas, who claim to share a common ancestry through Oduduwa, but even within the Yorubaland, there are several closely related states (see Osaghae 3). There are different legends that trace the origin of the Yoruba people, but all of them recognize Oduduwa as the archetypal ancestor, and they point to Ile-Ife as the ancestral home of all the Yorubas (Blier 70). In *The History of the Yorubas from the Earliest Times to the Beginning of the British Protectorate*, the Reverend Samuel Johnson has offered the most detailed account of the wars in pre-Nigeria Yorubaland. Before the beginning of colonization, the different states—Egba, Oyo, Ekiti, and Ilorin—had existed as independent polities, speaking inter-related dialects that derived from the Yoruba language spoken in Oyo. Each of their *Obas* (Kings) is recognized as a descendant of Oduduwa, and subject to *Ooni*, the supreme ruler of the entire Yoruba Kingdom headquartered in Ile-Ife. The Yorubas experienced constant intra-regional wars fuelled by fights over supremacy and against the domination of one group by another. The Fulanis conquered Ilorin in 1823, killing its Yoruba leader, Afonja, and incorporated the city into the Sokoto Caliphate the same year. With the conquest of Oyo by the Sokoto forces based in Ilorin, Ibadan emerged as the new power among the Yoruba states, and it successfully defeated the jihadist crusade in the South in 1840. After this, Ibadan sought to gain complete control over all the empires in the Yorubaland, a move that resulted in a protracted war by a confederacy of the other states—Ekiti, Ijebu, Egba, Oyo, Ife, and Ijesa—known as Ekitiparapo War, from 1877-1886. According to Toyin Falola and Matthew Heaton, through this

thirteen year-old war, the British gained ground in Yorubaland by offering a peace negotiation that turned all the states in the region to a protectorate in 1893 (76). Indirect rule was partly successful in this region during full scale colonial domination because the people had a system of governance that was close to the one in the North (Osaghae 3).

In the Eastern part of present-day Nigeria are the Igbo, Ijaw, Calabar, Annang, Efik, and a few other sub-groups that had no centralized hierarchy like the ones in the North and West. Unlike Western Nigerians, it is hard to trace the origin of the Igbo people. The Igbos are the dominant group in the East, although they do not speak the same language as the Calabars and the rest of the groups in the region. Also, in spite of their speaking the same generic language, except Onitsha whose origin is traced to Benin, the Igbo city-states were autonomous and non-centralized (Osaghae 3). Leadership in the region was based on clans and family structure. As a result of this system, the British forces spent several years seizing the entire Igboland “village by village” (Falola and Heaton 106). It was no surprise that the indirect rule was not successful in the East, but when the British completed their conquest of Igboland, they annexed it with the Southern protectorate. The conquest of these regions by colonization was not without violence, dehumanization, and the use of military force. Even the Sokoto Caliphate that relied on its strong military might to implement the *Jihadist* crusade was overpowered by the offensives launched by Lugard against the North, killing the caliph, and bringing Sokoto under full colonial control in 1903 (Falola and Heaton 93).

From the foregoing account, constituting present-day Nigeria are formerly separate entities that could have ended up existing as, at least, three different countries had colonialism not existed. Upon the forceful crystallization of these elements into one British Empire on



January 1, 1914, the primordial experiences of the various Nigerian ethnocultural groups would change forever. First, there were different governments and cultural practices that had existed long before the coming of Europe to Africa. Following the making of a new supra-national state from the disparate elements, the British found themselves searching for the best strategies to keep Nigeria as one indivisible colonial formation. They sought answers from indirect rule, colonial education, and regionalism. There could have been other policies that the colonial authorities vigorously pursued to preserve their brain child, Nigeria, but the ones identified below are those I consider most telling after the amalgamation in 1914.

First, Lugard opted for indirect rule, a policy that was initially developed “in the Punjab in India in the 1840s as the British sought to bring that area under control,” to pacify his colonial subjects (Matera, Bastian, and Kent 29). E.C. Ejiogu observes that in spite of the different definitions of indirect rule, as practised by British imperialists, a satisfying explanation of the term has not yet been offered. This policy is often depicted as the vesting of authority in native rulers to act as intermediaries between colonial officers and the local peoples in Africa, including Nigeria. This description, Ejiogu insists, “is hardly suitable because” the “formulation and implementation” of indirect rule “were inspired by imperial ambitions and how to achieve them as opposed to the interest of the African peoples” (140). Rather than respect the dignity of the local peoples, indirect rule largely served the promulgation of British colonial administrators as people of superior character. Lugard had developed and deployed this framework when he was the High Commissioner of the government of the Northern Protectorate to govern the natives through his control of the subjects, traditional rulers, and chiefs that were loyal to him. His experience in the North inspired him to privilege the British relationship with the Hausa-Fulani

rulers, and to gradually build leadership elements from the very malleable Northern subjects that were strategically inserted into Nigeria's political terrain.

Upon his elevation as the first colonial Governor-General of Nigeria from January 1914 to August 1919, Lugard extended indirect rule to all parts of the country, ignoring the fact that the realities and systems of leadership in these places, as noted above, were different (Nwabara, "British Foundation" 316-17). According to Falola and Heaton, by instituting indirect rule, Lugard claimed that he aimed "to respect traditional political institutions and promote continuity between indigenous and colonial regimes, but in practice indirect rule alienated traditional authorities from their subject population through their association with the colonial regime" (110). Traditional rulers and warrant chiefs appointed by colonial masters were regarded as corrupt agents of the British officers and enemies of the native peoples. Falola and Heaton explain that traditional rulers were at the mercy of colonial officers whose directives they must consistently enforce in order to avoid the risk of being deposed and replaced with more compliant subjects aspiring to act as native rulers (110-11). Indirect rule met stiff resistance in the South, but it was successful in the North (Nwabara, "British Foundation" 316). Nonetheless, the colonizers relied heavily on their relationship with the Hausa-Fulani elite to implement their empire building strategy across Nigeria.

Colonial educational policy was the second means through which the British preserved their relationship with the North and further tightened their grip on Nigeria. The social and cultural landscapes of the country began to change rapidly following the intense work of missionaries. New mission schools constructed by European missionaries to convert the natives to Christianity and educate them began springing up mostly in the South and the East. The

missionaries collaborated with colonial officers to fulfil their objective of spreading colonial education all over the country except the North, whose people were vehemently opposed to European/Christian education (Tibenderana 517-18). Also, the Hausa-Fulani ruling class had warned the colonial officers to stop the missionaries from coming to the North with their preaching and education because Islamic leaders in the region were determined not to compromise the Arabic model of education they had established long before the beginning of colonial rule (see Gbadamosi 89-92). In order to sustain their peaceful relationship with the Northerners, colonial officers blocked the missionaries from advancing to the Hausa-Fulani territory. The last thing the colonial administration wanted at the time was dismantling the system of imperial dominance it had grounded through its loyal representatives in the North. So it was that colonial/missionary education was restricted to the South (see Tibenderana). Not only did the North-British accord encourage preference for one group over another, but the colonial educational strategy also “produced assorted varieties of durable political legacies that” continue to “engender the political instability of Nigeria” (Ejiogu 152). The legacies this policy produced are embedded in the collective fabric of the existence of present-day multi-ethnic Nigerian state.

As the number of Nigerian beneficiaries of Western education grew, the beginning of the 1930s, not surprisingly, witnessed the emergence of anti-colonial sentiments in the country (Nkemdirim 92). This period progressed as nationalist movement, and it culminated in a full-scale struggle spreading throughout the country after 1946. In addition to pressuring the colonial administration “to embark on more progressive planning measures,” including ensuring better “spending on infrastructure, education, and health facilities,” prominent among the goals of the advocates of this movement was the participation of Nigerians in the government of their country and the call for independence (Falola and Heaton 136). Even in their pursuit of self-rule, tension

between the diverse ethnic groups increased in the last decade of dependency. At that time, famous regional figures such as the Sardauna of Sokoto, Ahmadu Bello (1910-1966), Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe (1904-1996), and Chief Obafemi Awolowo (1909-1987) had fully emerged, forming political parties imbued with ethnic fraternity, and gradually building serious fights over which region of the country should assume the coveted responsibility of leading Nigeria immediately after colonial rule (Geertz 150).

With time, despite its promise of peace and a united country, the nationalist movement increasingly became vaguer, less meaningful, and marred in ethnic/regional solidarity rather than a viable interest in pursuing “a progressive unification of diverse elements into an intensely solidarity opposition to colonial rule” (Geertz 150). Also inherent in the character of the nationalist movement was the quest for attention and control by representatives of the three main regions. This struggle, as Clifford Geertz asserts, “was less a matter of defying foreign authority and more a matter of drawing boundaries, founding capitals, and distributing powers in such a way as to dampen and contain sharpening ethnoregional hostilities prior to the disappearance of that authority” (150). These flagrant divisions became the *modus operandi* and downfall of the nationalist movement, a struggle that was initially aimed at forcing British imperial dominance out of Nigeria. In order to accede to the nationalists’ demand for control, the colonial administration deployed its final ammunition in the form of regional governments, a strategy that James Coleman describes as the “regionalization of nationalism,” which further perpetuated ethnic divisions (qtd. in Geertz 150). This model was strictly a federal system of government. With Lagos serving as the capital of the central government, each region had its own capital, cabinet, high court, budget, and a leader known as the premier.

Aside from being dominated by one particular ethnic group, each region was controlled by a certain political party formed through cultural affiliation, with the Northern Peoples' Congress (NPC), led by Bello, occupying the North; the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC), led by Azikiwe; and the Action Group (AG), led by Awolowo, dominating the Southeast and Southwest respectively. This regionalization of nationalism technique did little to proffer a solution to the obvious collapse of a cohesive Nigerian federation governed by indigenous leaders even before it could emerge from the shadow of colonialism (Attah 612-18). On the contrary, it was a strategic political partitioning that merely reconstituted the colonial subjects into a geographical formation occupied by ethnoregional folk societies that measured, as well as addressed, their problems, political struggles, and neglect (by the federal government) in comparison to the benefits one region enjoyed at the expense of another (Attah 610-12). The regionalization of nationalism had, and it continues to have, serious effects on the sociopolitical experience of Nigeria. By federating the country and initiating regional governments, the British thought they were mediating unity, but they were oblivious of the fact that their action had resulted in the emergence of new regional identities and divisions (Attah 611).

The outcome of regionalization notwithstanding, its failures to solidify Nigeria as a unitary system must not be blamed entirely on colonial officers. Although the British introduced the process, perhaps it might have been prevented from going into effect had the nationalist leaders collectively rejected it at the time. Furthermore, this type of governance should not be held accountable for the lack of unity in Nigeria simply because it influenced the increase in ethnic hostilities. As a matter of fact, reactions to the introduction of regionalization were mixed, and there was no unity among Nigerians to condemn it as a hindrance to or praise it as a necessary pathway to a pan-Nigerian quest for collective national consciousness and identity. For

instance, Falola and Heaton point out that Azikiwe endorsed a regional system at its inception, opposed it later, and eventually embraced it again. His opposition to the system stemmed from what he perceived as the limited authority vested in the houses of assembly at the regional level, but when he finally renewed his support for regional governments, Azikiwe asked for additional regions and legislative houses (149). He was not alone.

Having been inserted into the Central Legislative Council under the 1947 Constitution, the North was convinced that regionalizing the political process was most suitable approach to the preservation of its predominantly Islamic religion, tradition, and development in the larger and culturally diverse sociopolitical context of Nigeria. This position was inspired by the fact that the North still lagged behind the South in the European style education skills and experience required to conduct legislative functions at the central level. Aside from the fear of being dominated by the better educated and predominantly Christian South, the conservative elements of the North favored regional authority over the central government (Falola and Heaton 151). As already mentioned, these fears, attitudes, and divisions among prominent Nigerian figures culminated in the growth of Yoruba, Hausa, and Igbo nationalisms, otherwise known as regional nationalist movements.

Britain yielded to the demand for self-governance, and granted Nigeria independence on October 1, 1960, with Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa serving as the Prime Minister and Azikiwe retaining his position as the Governor-General. Nigeria became a republic on October 1, 1963, thus ending its status as a dominion of the Queen of Great Britain. The shocking events that followed this transition threw the young republic into disarray. First, politics was divided along ethnic and regional lines. There was fear among the major ethnic groups about one region

dominating the others. This apprehension “led to severely flawed elections in 1964 and 1965, in which all kinds of dirty tricks were used by every side” (Falola and Heaton 159). Consequently, there was political unrest across the country, leading many of its citizens to consider the federal system dysfunctional and calling time on the existence of Nigeria as a country since there was no trust among its different groups (Falola and Heaton 158-59). The aftermath of the confusion and crises of that era, including the military coup d’état discussed below, continues to linger in the consciousness of Nigerians to this moment.

### **NIGERIA WITHOUT COLONIALISM: MILITARY INTERVENTION, COMMOTION, AND THE CLIMAX OF ANIMOSITY**

The role the Nigerian military played in shaping the history of the country is so significant that it requires more than a casual mention. Following the political disturbances of the First Republic of 1963 to 1966, the country witnessed its first military coup. According to most sources, the coup happened on January 15, 1966, and was carried out by a group of military officers who were mostly Igbo. Upon their seizure of power, the officers killed Prime Minister Tafawa Balewa. They also murdered Ahmadu Bello and S.L. Akintola, who were premiers of the Northern and Western regions respectively (Falola and Heaton 173; Peters and Ejiogu 167-68). The leaders of the coup were five majors, namely Kaduna Nzeogwu, E. Ifeajuna, D. Okafor, A. Ademoyega, and C.I. Anuforo (Falola and Heaton 173; Miners 170; Luckham 17-18). Major Kaduna Nzeogwu, an Easterner, is still popularly regarded as the mastermind of the coup. Most of the victims were Northerners, some of whom were federal cabinet ministers and strong political figures. The Northerners interpreted the coup as a violent attack on their members and political leaders and “as an attempt to replace Hausa/Fulani domination with Igbo hegemony” (Attah 613). After the mutiny, Major General Aguiyi Ironsi, an Easterner, took over the reins of

power, suspended the constitution, banned all political activities, and appointed three senior military officers as governors of the three regions. There is still widespread speculation in Nigeria, mostly outside the Eastern region, that Ironsi was privy to the first military coup mainly because of the manner in which he quickly took “advantage of the vacuum created by the partial success of Nzeogwu’s plan” (Miners 170). There has been no evidence, however, to substantiate this claim or even Nzeogwu’s contention that Ironsi was one of the targets of the killings.

To the consternation of the people of the Northern region, Ironsi did not try the officers arrested for carrying out the January 1966 coup. Instead of bringing them to justice for the mass murders they allegedly committed, the new Head of State vowed to eradicate regionalism, corruption, and tribalism, a vision that Nzeogwu claimed was exactly the justification for the coup (Gould, *Struggle* 27-28). In addition to releasing the Igbo premiers of the Eastern and Midwestern regions captured but not hurt during the military take-over, surrounding himself with Igbo advisers, and refusing to try the coup masterminds, Ironsi presided over a government whose actions the North suspected were conspiratorial (Osaghae 59). Aside from the allegation that Ironsi used his influence as the military head of state to expedite the promotion of Igbo officers in the army, he abolished the federal system, and turned Nigeria into a unitary government through the promulgation of “Decree no. 34 of May 24, 1966” (Falola and Heaton 173; Uzoigwe 228-29). This process restructured Nigeria from regionalism to a provincial system, with Lagos retaining its status as the capital.

For the North, Ironsi’s actions implied an Igbo domination that threatened the Hausa-Fulani control of Nigeria that had hitherto been enhanced by the population quota system instituted by the colonial administration. This fear caused a counter-coup on July 29, 1966, in



which Ironsi was killed at the residence of his friend the Military Governor of the Western Region, Lieutenant-Colonel Adekunle Fajuyi, in Ibadan (Uzoigwe 174). After Ironsi, Nigeria had a new head of state, Lieutenant-Colonel Yakubu Gowon, a Northerner. He immediately reverted the country to regionalism to the dissatisfaction of Lieutenant Colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu, the military governor of the Eastern Region<sup>1</sup>.

In the aftermath of the second coup, there were riots and indiscriminate killings of Easterners living in the North. Most of the killings were carried out by Northern soldiers who were supposed to maintain law and order, in addition to providing security to the vulnerable Igbos in the region (Gould 33-34). The humiliation and killings of Igbo people in the North prompted Ojukwu to question if the Igbos were still safe and expected to remain part of the Nigerian federation. Due to what he perceived as the federal government's refusal to protect the Easterners in the North, Ojukwu began a secession project that eventually would lead to the creation of a new sovereign country for the Igbos (Falode 120). Several attempts to ensure peace between the federal government and the East did not work out. The most famous of these steps was the Aburi meeting held on January 4 and 5, 1967, in Aburi, Ghana, at the request of Ojukwu. Both parties interpreted the terms of the accord they reached differently. To Gowon, the accord meant keeping Nigeria as one federation, while Ojukwu construed it as the granting of power to him to control the East as a Nigerian military governor or lead the East to secede from the federation on his own volition (Falola and Heaton 174-75).

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<sup>1</sup>In their various accounts, Max Siollun, G.N. Uzoigwe, N.J. Miners, Robin Luckham, and Jimi Peters provide more details on these incidents and military coups in Nigeria.

In preparation for his formation of a new republic, Ojukwu ordered all Igbos living outside the region to return home (Luckham 91-92). After peace talks between Gowon and Ojukwu had broken down, the latter declared the East as the independent Republic of Biafra on May 30, 1967 (Luckham 337). Gowon regarded the secession as an act of rebellion that must be stopped because he was committed to keeping together all the ethnic groups and regions that were part of Nigeria at independence. Should the Igbos secede, the Gowon-led federal military government was afraid other ethnocultural groups could also separate from the federation. Luckham argues that Ojukwu attempted to persuade influential political figures in the West and Mid-West to join the Igbo secession, a move that they turned down. Had they cooperated with Ojukwu, Luckham claims, the federal government might have lost the momentum and zeal to prosecute the war (332-36). Desperate to keep Nigeria as one country, Gowon ordered the federal soldiers to begin a push to stop Biafra. What ensued was a war between the two parties, and it lasted from 1967-1970. Upon realizing that Biafrans could no longer survive the aggression from the federal soldiers, Ojukwu abandoned the war, and went into exile in Côte d'Ivoire. By the time Biafra fell on January 12, 1970, "between 1 and 3 million" Easterners had been killed (Osaghae 69).

### **COLONIALISM AND INDEPENDENCE**

In all fairness, the problems with post-independence Nigeria can be attributed to the failure of the country's leaders and people to be responsible and tolerate their unique differences. More so, the chaos creeping into Nigeria immediately after independence could be traced to its poor preparation for self-rule. The nationalist leaders, like the colonial administrators, also committed blunders in their agitation for independence. The former were more interested in attaining power and fight over it than setting in place effective structures upon which a new government would

be constructed (see Geertz). The autonomy granted Nigeria turned out to be a hurried response to the agitation of the nationalist leaders, especially those from the South, to establish self-government. There was no comprehensive, workable, and practicable transition process set in motion at the time. Freedom, without asking the question of what to do with it, was the main asset desperately sought by politicians from all the regions. No wonder then that the country, after its attainment of that freedom, quickly offered “the most unformed materials upon which to base an assessment of its essential character and probable future” (Geertz 153). At the dawn of its independence, Nigeria had no common, singular collective national character and established sets of values and principles, but different weak visions influenced by selfishness, pursuit of self-aggrandizement, regionalized ideologies, and chains of reactions toward fears of domination of one group by another within the federation (see Achebe, *There Was a Country*). The first political system installed at independence offered the local leaders an opportunity to correct the errors of colonialism by ingraining the desire for peaceful coexistence in the consciousness of Nigerians, but these politicians failed woefully, and their actions continue to haunt the country to this day.

Far more interesting is the manner in which the idea of Nigeria has been represented in literature. Not only does the history of the country, as recounted in this chapter, complicate the ideas of nationhood and national literature, but it also, as I will elaborate in this study, explains the disillusionment of Nigerian writers with the national leadership. Every Nigerian writer, so to say, has his or her own idea of Nigeria, and has represented this idea accordingly. Part of my purpose in this chapter has been to extrapolate how the colonial process facilitated the emergence of this attitude among the different ethnocultural groups that make up the country/federation today. Based on my reading of Nigeria’s history, I have realized that the first generation of

Nigerians that were born at the turn of the twentieth century, especially those in the Southeast and Southwest, benefited immensely from colonial rule, in terms of education and exposure. I understand that this view is controversial because it does not (and cannot) accurately express the reactions of all Nigerians to colonial rule, but the spreading of European education during the colonial process had positive effects, one of which was the intellectual development of the natives. For instance, it was through their acquisition of Western education that Nigerian nationalist leaders could engage the colonial administration in multiple dialogues during the quest for independence (Ejiogu 152-54).

That generation, according to Achebe, “was a very lucky one” (*There Was a Country* 39) because its members saw the emergence of the period of hope and prosperity, and they did not have to worry about kidnappings, corruption, unemployment, and the many other vices plaguing the Nigeria of today, as we see in the novels examined in this study. Long after 1960, the fundamental question that is still being asked is: when will Nigerian leaders and citizens jointly fulfill the aspirations of the nationalist dreams? Ironically, often regarded as a land richly blessed with natural resources, especially petroleum, Nigeria is one of the countries renowned for poverty and corruption (see Agbiboa; Udechukwu and Mujtaba). In 2001, for instance, Nigeria ranked number 90 among the 91 most corrupt countries in the world (Udechukwu and Mujtaba 232). It is not just the internal problems of the country that are worrisome, but its image in the international community is also troubling. In *The Age of Stupid*, a film documentary directed by the British film maker Franny Armstrong, the impact of corruption in Nigeria does not go unnoticed. Although this documentary is primarily about the effects of climate change, it also reveals how the Nigerian government and the oil companies, specifically Shell, jeopardize the lives of the ordinary people. In the film, twenty-two-year old Layefa Malin shows the

destruction in her village, Kokojabani, in the Niger-Delta. According to the narrator, thirteen percent of the oil revenue is supposed to be used for community projects, “but the local community share is almost all but lost to the corrupt political system.” Worse still, Shell Oil abandoned the health centre it was building in the village, citing the kidnapping of its workers by militants in the region.

In spite of it “being [located] in the most profitable oil region in West Africa,” this community “has no health service, no secondary school, no electricity, and no drinking water.” Having lost her sister to water pollution, Layefa aspires to be a medical student so that she can help people heal from waterborne diseases and live longer. Because there is no help from anyone, she decides to fish in the polluted water for four years so that she can afford to pay her school fees, rent, and buy “nice clothes.” When she can no longer find enough fish in the river, because they die due to oil spills and water pollution, she joins a dangerous and illegal business—the black market—of selling diesel “to make quick cash” for her education. This young and ambitious woman laments the abject poverty in her village that produces hundreds of barrels of crude oil for the Nigerian economy daily. She cares about her people living well and having access to education so that their conditions can improve. She wishes that the amount of wealth taken from her village by the government and its accomplices would work for the good of her people. Kokojabani is an exploited village; Layefa is a betrayed citizen. Understandably, there are bound to be different reactions to this docu-drama, but, to say the least, it draws attention to the level of corruption in Nigeria, and it offers a glimpse of the country’s image in the international community.

In his insightful book, *You're Not a Country, Africa*, the Canadian-based Nigerian literary scholar, Pius Adesanmi, takes issue with the lack of values in the Nigerian political and social arenas. A staunch critic of the government of his homeland, Adesanmi bemoans the extent to which the country's elites have engraved corruption in the annals of Nigeria's history. He observes that while other countries, especially the United States of America and France, have clearly demonstrated the effective presence of their national myths in their citizens' consciousness, Nigeria has no national myth that defines or differentiates it from the rest of the world. What the country has is the "national cake" (201). Shockingly, as Adesanmi notes, "while one country defines itself as a dream" and another "defines itself as work," the Nigerian federation is "dessert, and [it] even proceeds to block the majority of its citizenry from that chocolate cake" to the advantage of the ruling class. Nigeria's "laziest" and strangest myth "holds the key to corruption," and it "is the operational metaphor and one of the most evocative explanations of our national tragedy," Adesanmi adds (202). He implies that unscrupulous exploitation and neglect of the common good of the people are two of the bizarre features of the vague character of Nigeria. More than five decades after independence, the federation is still struggling to construct a national myth with which its citizens can identify. What led to this situation that Adesanmi considers betraying, disappointing, and unfortunate? The investigation goes on. Interestingly, however, the search for answers to this singular question has influenced a paradigm shift in the third generation Nigerian novel.

To a certain degree, I share the discontent of contemporary Nigerian writers with the tainted practices of Nigerian leaders. My experiences connect well with some of those described in the primary texts, especially *Waiting for an Angel* and *Graceland*. I was born in the Southwest, predominantly occupied by the Yoruba people, into a more fiercely divided and

troubled Nigerian state. I did not witness the clamor for independence, the political crises after that time, and the Civil War. All that I know about those moments I have read in books whose collective subject is Nigeria. As a secondary (high) school student reading about the last decade before 1960, I was particularly fascinated by the way in which one of the country's foremost nationalist leaders, Chief Anthony Enahoro, moved the motion for independence in the legislative assembly in 1953. Enahoro sponsored the "Motion of Destiny" in that year, demanding Nigeria's independence by 1956, but the Northern representatives opposed this call on the grounds that they were not ready for independence, and they threatened to cease to be part of the federation should the motion pass (Uzoigwe 16-17; Nwaorgu 120). The dream of independence was finally realized in 1960, but my thoughts constantly dwelt on the struggle for political liberation from colonialism since Enahoro first asked for it.

Even today, each time I reflect on that moment, I cannot help but wonder how people across the country must have felt about the prospect of freedom and self-rule, or the government of Nigerians, for Nigerians, and by Nigerians. There must have been great expectations and attractive promises all over the soon to be sovereign federation. Had I witnessed that period, I might have internalized a lofty future, and entertained in my consciousness the grandeur of a colonialism-free Nigeria. But I came of age much later, and the situation in the country today has consistently betrayed my youthful, and somewhat nostalgic, feeling and my obsession over imagining it. My own idea of Nigeria is the image of a country whose existence has been perpetually submerged in indescribable complexities. For me, the country is indeed a mere geographical space that lacks recognizable cohesion and a clearly defined unity among its different regions. Furthermore, Nigeria, as I see it, is a country that treats its ordinary citizens like aliens or, pardon the phrase, worthless bastards. Since my intention in this work is to

objectively study the representations of the postcolonial condition of Nigeria in the third generation novel, it is more than necessary that I put aside my personal feelings toward the country, and rather concentrate on its image, character, and recurrent metamorphosis in literature from here on.

### ETHNICITY, NATION, AND NATION-STATE

At this juncture, I wish to explain my understanding of the meanings of ethnicity, nation, and nation-state because these terms are extensively used in this work. My reference to ethnicity or ethnic throughout this study has the same implication. Ethnicity is a very broad term that is often difficult to define. This difficulty is partly due to the ways in which the word is used as a substitute for race, but Nigeria offers scholars a convincing excuse to decouple the two words. Werner Sollors notes that the meaning of *ethnicity* “changes according to the speaker who uses it” (191). This is an interesting position from which one can start thinking about the term. Yet, he also states that “race is one aspect of ethnicity” (193). His argument incorporates these two concepts into each other, and it fails to take into account the use(s) of expressions such as (skin) color, for example, as markers/labels to describe someone that is white or black. Besides, his claim does not explain the implication of terms like “white race” and “black race,” that are often seen in political and literary practices. One wonders why a category such as black, white, or brown ethnicity is illogical and never used.

Similarly, Peter Kivisto and Paul Croll, as well as Steve Fenton, strike a common ground in their elaboration of the overlaps between race and ethnicity. They agree that it is difficult to separate these words from each other in political and social constructs. They challenge the use(s) of the words to “place people in a hierarchy that defines groups in terms of whether they are



favoured or not, privileged or not, and so forth” (Kivisto and Croll 2). This sort of categorization is somewhat simplistic because it could merely speak of discrimination and prejudice based on gender, social affiliation, and so on. In fact, these critics observe that the definitions of race and ethnicity vary from place to place (Kivisto and Croll 20). This is where their proposition is starkly different from Sollors’. J. Milton Yinger, an expert in sociology and anthropology, is equally aware of the interchangeable uses of ethnic and race in popular discourses, but he also notes that the “use of a racial criterion in defining ethnicity varies from time and place” (17). In this case, the internal categorization of the peoples and persons of Nigeria according to skin color and “biological or physiological differences” (Kivisto and Croll 2) is an invalid premise upon which to base cases of discrimination, differences, and conflict in the country. This argument acknowledges that there cannot be a unitary theory of ethnicity (Fenton 3), but as the term pertains to Nigeria, it is used to describe a group connected by the same culture, kinship, custom, and (possibly) language. The ethnic, as Kivisto and Croll state, is a reference “to cultural differences” between the peoples in a region or even continent (20). It invokes the primordial features, affiliations, and sentiments that distinguish one group from another population of people that share a common kinship.

This view leads me to the much larger notion of nation. The various ethnocultural groups in Nigeria can be regarded as distinct ethnic nations subsumed under one federal/plural state. There have been several debates about whether Nigeria is a nation or a nation-state. The next chapter engages with this discourse more elaborately. In the meantime, I align my thought with Benedict Anderson’s in defining nation as a group of people that imagine themselves as one “political community” that is “both inherently limited and sovereign” (6). A nation exists because its members express a desire, develop a consciousness, and form a myth of a social

collectivism to which every member pledges allegiance. Nation is by inclusion based on conformity to shared consciousness. This idea is frequently associated with Ernest Renan (1823-1892), the French thinker renowned for his critical writing on the theories of nation, nationalism, and national identity. According to Renan, not only is the nation “a large-scale solidarity,” but it is also a “consent, the clearly expressed desire to continue a common life” (19). He theorizes nation as a singular entity marked by cohesion and the willingness to embrace the myth of a shared origin. Renan’s definition is insufficient to represent or describe the exact nature of Nigeria’s political and cultural landscape, but it is suitable for describing each of the distinct ethnocultural groups within the federation.

By and large, Renan’s idea of nation is the closest to ethnicity. Therefore, I use the phrase “Nigerian nation-state” to mean the conglomeration of all the ethnocultural groups under a heterogeneous political and geographical space. The terms “Nigerian federation,” “federal,” and “nation-space” are also synonyms for this expression, while “pluri-national” is used to acknowledge the status of the country as a non-homogenous entity. In addition, “nation building” denotes the social, political, and literary efforts/attempts of Nigerians to establish a type of country that is related to the definition of nation offered above. This project adopts “national” and “nationalism” to imply a collective or general attitude toward the political and economic circumstances in pre/post-independence Nigeria. My use of these terms, especially “national” in the title of this dissertation, is not intended to construct Nigeria as a singular nation, but rather the term is a substitute for the people’s feelings toward the central government. Finally, by the phrase “ethnic nation(alism),” I mean resistant (political) activity, affinity, solidarity, and identity of any of the Nigerian cultural groups that fraternize and define themselves based on ancestral traits.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE SCRAMBLE FOR A NATIONAL LITERATURE AND POSTCOLONIALISM IN A PLURI-NATIONAL STATE

Before going further, it is important that I state the obvious here: Nigerians did not invent the novel. During the colonization of the country by Great Britain, the literature of conquest originated from Europe. Since colonization signified conquest and rule, the colonized peoples were regarded as conquered peoples by colonialist writers. According to Simon Gikandi, “the process of colonization existed as both an unprecedented historical episode and a monumental literary event” (“African Literature” 58). During the period of colonial conquest and rule, modern Nigerian literature was born as a counterpoint to the European canonical text. African literature, of which Nigerian literature is a part, experienced rapid growth during the time because it was a weapon that the colonized had embraced in their struggle against imperialistic domination by Europe. African literature achieved wide recognition because it was a mouthpiece for cultural resistance against the colonial enterprise at the close of the nineteenth century. By doing so, this body of writing became a vehicle for spreading nationalist ideas among members of the new and emerging nations while simultaneously taking on the colonial power and its textual presence, that is European writing centred on Africa, for distorting the history of the colonized (Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial* 70-92). In this regard, Gikandi recalls Achebe’s affirmation that “one of the key motivations for producing an African literature was to restore the moral integrity and cultural autonomy of the African in the age of decolonization” (“African Literature” 56). This commitment shows that the early preoccupation of modern African literature was to re-narrate the history of Africa, and to provide a philosophical ground upon which to deconstruct the very ideological framework on which colonialism was erected. African

writers at the time transferred their engagement with Europe's distortion of Africa's history to their diverse environments. The subjects of the early writings of postcolonial Africa, specifically Nigeria, are a testament to this claim.

Of course, the idea of the novel and the notion of the modern nation were imported into Nigeria/Africa under the auspices of colonialism. Following their contact with European culture and education, modern Nigerian fiction writers energetically participated in the project of importing the novel into the country during colonial rule. Nationalism, "the most transportable [. . .] of all modern, secular ideologies" (Brantlinger 260), also made its way to the region during colonization. Nationalism, as an ideology, was transported to Nigeria through the European encounter (Ajayi 200). On its arrival, it was redefined to suit the anti-imperialist struggle, which the Nigerian novel of the first generation orchestrated with a view to delegitimizing the colonial presence. In its earliest years, Nigerian literature was intent on countering the colonial process by spreading nationalist sentiments among the people (Krishnan, "Affiliation" 73-74). The Nigerian novel influenced the rise of the sort of nationalism that Patrick Brantlinger identifies as "more or less explicit critiques of English nationalism/imperialism" (260). Of course, nationalism did not have the same meaning for English and Nigerian writers. For the former, the nationalism expressed through the English writing on the colony meant preserving the English presence in the distant territories controlled by the British government. For the latter, nationalism meant eradicating colonialism and its vestiges in Nigeria. What is striking in this argument is the clash of different nationalisms. English nationalism elevated its imperial power in the colony, but Nigerian nationalism was intent on dismantling that power through literature (Brantlinger 261). For the proponents of Nigerian nationalism, the country was a sacred grove that must be preserved. Their thought was that the entity could not fulfil its potential as long as an external

power controlled it. The failure of these sentiments to produce the country envisioned has developed into the subject of literary and political discourses on Nigeria today.

Nigerian literature was, and still is, a vast body and movement that developed side by side with the nationalist movement before independence (see Lindfors, "Politics" 24-25). Through their writing, Nigerian authors configured their country as a literary body, representing colonialism as an encroachment on their culture, tradition, and humanity. Prominent writers, including Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, J.P. Clark, Christopher Okigbo, and stage artists such as Hubert Ogunde, employed literature as a means through which the "natives" confronted colonial structures in the country. Literature provided an ideal template for these writers and artists to engage in what Michel Foucault calls the "discursive formation" (qtd. in Brennan 46) whose underlying objective was drawing on the collective experience of the people to advance the cause of nationalism. This preoccupation was founded upon nationalist sentiments, and it inadvertently invented a utopia that the cultural and political elites hoped would serve as a foil to colonialism (see Lindfors, "Politics" 22-25).

Indeed, the realist novel is arguably the most popular literary genre employed by Nigerian writers and artists to propagate and promote a revolutionary nationalist consciousness. The narratives about Nigeria, its history, and experiences have been most effective through the novel. In his examination of the connection between the novel and the nation, Timothy Brennan argues that the former has been deployed by European and Third World writers to "thematize the centrality of nation-forming" (131). Moreover, the interconnectedness between the nation and the novel, as Homi Bhabha suggests, stems from the idea that writing the nation is a "narrative movement" ("DissemiNation" 297). Brantlinger legitimizes this view when he contends that

“nations and novels form a two-way ideological street. A corollary is that the development of the modern nation-state and that of the novel were not just simultaneous occurrences, but in some sense codeterminant” (255). The rise of the novel and that of the nation are contingent upon each other. This point was applicable to Nigeria up to the time the clamor for independence was projected within and outside the country as a collective struggle. For example, Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* has been widely read as a representation of Africa and, in fact, the disintegration of a cohesive Igbo life by colonialism (see Adetunji 253-56; Lawtoo 30-31). Nigeria is part of that Africa. Depending on who analyzes it, this novel could be read as the basis for Nigerians to revolt against colonial rule and rebuild that pastoral life lost to the coming of the white man.

In their separate essays, Wendy Griswold and Sarah Corse describe the connection between literature and the nation. Corse notes that the imagined community that members of a nation consciously form “is constructed in part through literature” (1282). Corse and Griswold are more general in their discussion of the impact of literature in nation building. Their observations are not invalid, but Brennan is more specific in that he identifies the novel as the strongest literary genre that has appeared most influential in the birth of modern nations. Pramod Nayar supports Brennan’s theory of the novel by stating that storytelling, which is synonymous with fiction, “is integral to the formation of national identity” (70). This point does not disregard the general role of literature in every society, but it affirms that the novel is most effective because, more than any other form of literature, it is easily accessible to the reader. In addition, since the nation is a collective body of people that regularly engage in political struggles, there is a need for its members to represent their nationalistic concerns through a process of fictionalization that embodies a direct connection with the people’s desire.

As “literature participated in the formation of nations through the creation of ‘national print media’—the newspaper and the novel” in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries Europe (Brenan 129), so did the novel coincide with and participate in the rise of nationalism in Nigeria in the late 1950s. Popular print media such as newspapers were also helpful in making the novel a discursive vehicle for drawing attention to the events happening in the country. For instance, Nnamdi Azikwe’s *The West African Pilot* was a leading example of the newspapers used to advocate political independence. *The Pilot* was actively involved in the struggle against European imperialism in Africa. Established in November 1937, it encouraged wider literacy among Nigerian civil servants, especially through its critiques of colonialism. Not only did it engage the country in a conversation over independence, but it also enhanced the rapid development of modern Nigerian novels through reviews of Nigerian texts. In doing so, *The Pilot* legitimized the concerns of the novels that established their thoughts on the political independence and cultural heritage of Nigeria.

### **NATIONAL LITERATURE**

Following the preceding discussion, I will engage with the idea of a national literature in Nigeria at this point. All the primary texts used in this work reflect the post-independence disintegration, and arguing that they unanimously speak to the country’s character is a difficult proposition to defend. First, the perspectives from which they represent the problems in the country are different. Similarly, the major characters in the novels usually blame the crises in Nigeria on the people outside their own ethnicity. Due to this lack of cohesion in representations and the other reasons, which I will discuss soon, I argue that Nigeria does not have a national, but a federal

literature<sup>2</sup>. By a national literature, I mean a literature that reflects and promotes a single identity of the nation, and one that includes in its scope the political culture and collective heritage of the people constituting that nation. A federal literature is the totality of a country's literary productions devoid of discrimination against any imaginative work based on language and ethnic affiliation. Nigerian literary productions are not cohesive, and they refuse to establish a common model to narrativize the country's fragmented space. This lack of a national literature is not necessarily negative, for it reflects the true picture of the diversity and divisions that distinguish the country.

To explore the idea on a larger scale, the pioneers of Nigerian writing are the best resources to engage with. Most prominent among them is Achebe, whose definition of a national literature is obviously different from the one I am offering above. In *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, Achebe writes that:

A national literature is one that takes the whole *nation* for its province, and has a realized or potential audience throughout its territory. In other words a literature that is written in the *national language*. An ethnic literature is one which is available only to one ethnic group within the nation. If you take Nigeria as an example, the national literature, as I see it, is the literature written in English; and

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<sup>2</sup> My idea of federal literature was inspired by Albert Braz, who argues that as a confederacy of nations, Nigeria offers a good template for rethinking the model of national literature in a pluri-national polity. According to him, a federal literature is a suitable paradigm for a heterogeneous entity like Nigeria because it is the collective body of all the country's literary productions.



the ethnic literatures are in Hausa, Ibo, Yoruba, Efik, Edo, Ijaw, etc., etc. (92-93; second emphasis mine)

Achebe's definition of nation applies to the entire Nigerian federation even though writing in English is the main feature that he insists nationalizes a text. His premise, however, has serious pitfalls. Putting this point more succinctly, Chidi Amuta, who aligns his position with Achebe's, summarises the Achebean model of a Nigerian national literature as "that body of literature written in English" ("Literature" 90). This definition is weak and insufficient because, like Achebe's, it discriminates against the texts written in the native languages. Achebe's stance on the use of English is not strange to critics of Nigerian literature. The Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Achebe have vocalized the English language controversy in African literature more than anyone else. Clara Joseph argues that Achebe's and Ngũgĩ's dialogue hinges more on what the scope of an African nation should look like in terms of language and culture (58). Achebe's rationale for adopting English as a means of literary expression in Nigeria or Africa transcends a mere understanding of language diversity on the continent. Aside from the multiplicity of languages in the country, English provides a more vibrant platform for writers who privilege it for wider readership across the world, especially in the West. Joanna Sullivan, a literary critic and expert in Hausa literature, suggests in "The Question of a National Literature for Nigeria," that since most critics read and write in English, Nigerian writers who want their works given attention globally have to accede to the demands of their publishers to write and, if possible, think in English.

Ngũgĩ and Achebe differ on what an African language heritage should look like. Ngũgĩ privileges Gikuyu or KiSwahili across Africa, but Achebe insists that English, whose presence

on the continent Ngũgĩ still posits is imperialistic, is the best means to engage in a “literary” dialogue with the former colonizers. Ngũgĩ’s advocacy for Gikuyu or KiSwahili fails to respect the other languages in Africa. Nigeria, for instance, has a multitude of languages. Yet Ngũgĩ pays no respect to a single one of them or the reality of language diversity on the continent. While it pleases him to have all Africans speak Gikuyu, Ngũgĩ, as his *Decolonizing the Mind* clearly suggests, is poised to completely discard English as a means of communication or as a medium for his literary exhibition. The shortcoming of his argument lies in the fact that if everyone in Africa were to speak Gikuyu, the mother tongue Ngũgĩ knows, then peoples in Ghana, Mali, and Nigeria would be forced to speak a language other than their mother tongue. This is the irony of his stance. Ngũgĩ’s and Achebe’s debate represents a desire for the (African) nation, but their difference directly suggests a “lack of [that] nation” that they seek through their literary prowess (Joseph 58).

The same disagreement that is inherent in these scholars’ dialogue characterizes the controversies over Nigerian literature. Achebe does not regard a Nigerian text written in an indigenous language as part of the national literature. If the texts in Igbo, Hausa, or Yoruba are not national, then how should we categorize them? For Achebe, English is the only language that can unite Nigerians because texts written in the ethnic languages are divisive or such texts simply fall short of the ability to adequately articulate the daily realities and true experience of the country since they do not address audiences of Nigerian literature in the *national* language. As contentious as this notion sounds, it is shared by several other Nigerian writers who favour English as a medium of writing a national literature. Most studies on Nigerian literature privilege the texts written in English over the ones written in the local languages. Obviously, this particular study is no exception. For critics, editors, and publishers who pick those texts written

in English, Nigerian indigenous languages are not capable of reflecting the country's national identity and attracting readership outside their ethnic locale. Sullivan offers a statistic that buttresses this point:

What is even more remarkable is that Nigerian critics participate in the marginalization or complete disregard for indigenous language literatures. Yemi Ogunbiyi's *Perspectives on Nigerian Literature 2* (1988) contains thirty-seven articles, of which only six discuss Yoruba or Hausa language literatures. Other examples include *Nigerian Writers on the Nigerian Civil War* (Olu Obafemi, 1992), *Reflections: Nigerian Prose and Verse* (Frances Ademola, 1962), and *Strategic Transformation in Nigerian Writing* (Ato Quayson, 1997), all of which adhere strictly to English-language texts. (75-76)

The concern this statistic raises is the attempt of Nigerian writers and their critics to devalue the local languages and the texts written in them. Ironically, these writers' preference for English at the expense of the native languages denounces Nigeria's past. The use of English in Nigerian literature is not necessarily negative, but it has been so politicised that any text written in Yoruba or Igbo, for instance, hardly sees the light of the day in contemporary Nigeria (Sullivan 75). Such a text is limited and confined to its ethnic territory, stripped of its legitimacy to comment on the national discourse and identity. Not only is this text regarded as unnational for being written in a local language, but it also does not meet the criteria that Achebe spells out in his description of a Nigerian national literature.

Since English has been anointed as the language of a national literature in Nigeria, it is curious to know what makes D.O. Fagunwa's *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons* a Nigerian

ethnic literature while Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* has been frequently celebrated as a national text. The latter contains Igbo expressions whose ideas cannot be adequately represented in English. Clearly, Achebe relies on Igbo proverbs to convey his thoughts to his audience. If he thinks and writes in English all the time, Igbo aphorisms or words should not be included in his novels. Should they be, is it then not possible for those expressions to represent Achebe's novels as partly national and partly ethnic? This query is valid as long as Achebe is regarded as the author that creates his characters, and composes their expressions for them. Of course, one exception to the question is that the Igbo words in Achebe's novels are translated or transliterated into English so that a non-Igbo-speaking reader can understand them. The point of this argument is that Achebe's novels, and even Soyinka's plays, combine English and the authors' first languages. Therefore, the writers who chose/choose their local languages exclusively in their works should be given the same recognition, at least in the country, as the ones writing in English.

The attempt to disregard Nigerian texts published in the native languages as part of the national literatures stems from critics' perception of such literatures as being too rural and animistic. Fagunwa's *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons* personifies the metaphysics that is explicit in Yoruba mythology. It was originally written in Yoruba and published as *Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmale* in 1938, but later translated into English by Soyinka in 1968. In this Yoruba novel, gods, animals, evil, and good all coexist. The text allegorizes man's encounter with his own existentialism, including his ability to negotiate his fate through bravery and valor. Yet, Amuta reads *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons* and Amos Tutuola's *Palmwine Drinkard* as "animistic realism" because they are "informed by the consciousness of a social matrix in which man is still largely at peace in [his] pastoral village communities" (90). Speaking specifically of

Fagunwa's novel, how does the conflict in the text suggest peace? Every narrative is driven by conflict, and *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons* is no exception. It narrates the influence of gods on humanity the same way Achebe's *Arrow of God* and Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine* do. Still, Amuta locates and discusses *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons* outside the spectrum of national literature into which he perceptively inserts *Arrow of God* and *Things Fall Apart*. This effort to disregard Fagunwa's text as national and ascribe that status to Achebe's is both a clear indication of the critic's insufficient acquaintance with the idea of national literature and a complete misinterpretation of Yoruba cosmology. *Arrow of God* is replete with animism the same way *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons* is. Since Achebe suggests that a Nigerian literature must be written in English, Amuta potentially discredits Fagunwa for writing in Yoruba or Tutuola's famous work because it is riddled with substandard English. There is no denying that Fagunwa and Tutuola describe a place Bryce calls "a world of signs rooted in Yoruba cosmology" (53), but this approach should not make their works unnational. None of these writers, including Soyinka and Achebe, can lay claim to a text of national literature, given Achebe's own criteria. Nothing makes their works Nigerian other than the fact that the authors are Nigerians commenting on the pastoralism or chaotic disintegration of some places in their country. Amuta's attempt to provide a justification for Achebe's definition of national literature misses the opportunity to present an accurate and a better explanation of this important discourse.

There are other authors who elect to write exclusively in their native languages instead of nativizing or domesticating English the way the likes of Soyinka and Achebe uniquely do. Such writers see a different mode to comment on the postcolonial condition, but Achebe, by virtue of his characterization of the national literature, does not recognize this alternative. Presumably, all

the advocates of English language national literature are aware that it is impossible for the postcolonial project to express its feelings and thoughts without nativizing/hybridizing the European/English language. By nativization, I mean modifying a foreign language to suit a national project. In other words, it is the act of making another language your own. The position here is that the nativization of Nigerian or African English is critical to disseminating postcolonial thoughts and ideologies, but marginalizing the works of postcolonial subjects that prefer the indigenous language is less productive and unfair to the process of decolonization. Postcolonial writing can benefit from European and native languages, although evidently texts published in the latter are met with a smaller readership. That said, no particular author owns a language. So, each should write in the language s/he is comfortable with. Those that write in their indigenous languages should never have to fear that their contribution to the postcolonial project will be disregarded, especially by their compatriots, for not privileging the language of the former colonizer.

In addition to the foregoing discussion, language is not enough to determine a national literature. A national literature must reflect a national character or national culture that is constructed around the collective identity of the people. To this end, Bhabha notes that in print culture, “the scraps, patches, and rags of daily life must be repeatedly turned into the signs of a national culture, while the very act of the narrative performance interpellates a growing circle of national subjects” (“DissemiNation” 297). This definition is extremely problematic for a federal state such as Nigeria that is composed of numerous ethnic groups. There are two key terms in Bhabha’s passage. First, it is hard to determine Nigeria’s national culture and values, which Bhabha suggests are fundamental and must be written into the national literature. The problem here is that the Igbo culture is not synonymous with Nigeria’s national culture, nor can the

Yorubas pride themselves as the sole representation of that culture. Like the other groups, the Hausas and the Fulanis cannot represent Nigeria's national culture on their own. Neither can any of the minority groups do so. Or, since Achebe describes English as the language of national literature, one wonders if national culture also implies a culture imposed on Nigerians by that language through the people's acquaintance with European texts written in English. I am curious to know how Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, Amadi's *The Concubine*, and Tahir's *The Last Imam* represent Nigeria's national culture since these texts are influenced by the traditional, religious, and ethnic backgrounds of their authors.

Second, national identity determines national culture and vice versa. As long as Nigeria has not had, or does not have, a clearly defined collective identity, the meaning of its national culture remains elusive. Sullivan contends that because Nigeria is marked by "the absence of a discernibly stable national identity, ethnic and religious preferences constitute the metonymic categories, and have dominated both the political and cultural arenas of Nigerian life" (73). Sullivan's argument underscores the lack of cohesion among Nigeria's ethnic groups. She notes that the country's citizens define themselves mostly by their religious and ethnic differences, not a common national heritage. In its mimicry of this reality, Nigerian literature reflects the absence of a national culture through its drawing from the writer's ethnic background to explore the postcolonial condition of the country. One of the consequences is that there are no specific values pointing to a discernible national culture in Nigerian texts. What the reader finds most of the time is the culture of the writer's ethnicity underlying his/her ideological leaning and understanding of the federation. There is no arguing that subjects such as political instability/failures, poverty, corruption, sadistic violence, and religious and communal clashes are explicit in the texts of contemporary Nigerian literature. Yet, although these themes are

evidence of shared trans-ethnic experiences, they cannot sufficiently categorize the texts as national literatures.

In view of the arguments upon which the foregoing discussion has been predicated, literary critics and scholars can, at best, understand that a federal literature is a suitable model for Nigeria. On its own, a national literature should enhance the people's sense of belonging and their will to embrace a united entity. This is not the case with Nigeria. In contrast, a federal literature is plural. It is a discourse of ethnicity and all the other realities that engulf and define the country. This literature is not in any way negative. Unlike a national literature, a federal literature is a composite of the literary texts of the ethnic nations within the federated space irrespective of the languages in which they are written or the cultures they identify with. Their modes of articulation are irrelevant to their belonging to the nation state. Nevertheless, these texts are ambivalent in their articulation. Read within Nigeria, a Hausa text, for example, could represent the social concerns of a particular author's ethnicity or another ethnicity while it also deals artistically with the sociopolitical condition of the federation. The borderlines between the ethnic and the nation-state are often animated by the sentiments of the people. Addressing this subject, Bhabha contends that it is:

in reading between these borderlines of the nation-space that we can see how "people" come to be constructed within a range of discourses as *a double narrative movement*. The people are not simply historical events or parts of a patriotic body politic. They are also a complex rhetorical strategy of a social reference where the claim to be representative provokes a crisis within the process of signification and discursive address. (297, emphasis mine)



If every character is constructed “as a double narrative movement” that is Yoruba/Hausa/Efik/Igbo and Nigerian at the same time, how then do we know exactly for which nation he or she speaks? For example, we cannot read Obi Okonkwo (*No Longer at Ease*), Olunde (*Death and the King’s Horseman*), and Usman (*The Last Imam*)—more on these characters later—as federal and ethnic citizens or dual subjects because the authors construct them as Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa respectively. Achebe, Soyinka, and Tahir hail from the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria. Aside from exploring their groups’ ethnocultural attachments/experiences and animating the chaos into which their country plunged after independence, their writings fail to share a common consciousness. What we notice instead are the variations of their ideas about their country. Rooted in the following analyses is the evidence of this claim.

No doubt, *Things Fall Apart* leads the way in the concretization of the experience Bernth Lindfors designates as one of the “sad stories of culture conflict” from Africa by attempting to explain how a well-organized and organic Igbo community was made to disintegrate by its encounter with Christianity and European culture (“Politics” 25). Put differently, the novel details the demise of a complicated Igbo tradition following the arrival of colonialism in Africa. In this text, Achebe demonstrates his understanding of the powerful forces that ruin the social ties of the traditional Igbo community that has had a distinct quality of life before the sudden appearance of the “white man” with his economy, government, and religion in Umuofia. The main conflict in the narrative is embodied by Okonkwo, since he stands in fierce opposition to anything that is unmanly, including his father, who represents everything Okonkwo detests. The discourse the story offers is that opposing the presence of the colonizing force is a manly thing to do, and the protagonist deems all the people who fail to understand his concern as unmanly and cowardly. Banished from his hometown Umuofia for committing a serious crime against the

goddess of the earth, Okonkwo returns in the closing section of the novel to confront the new British imperialism with its strange Christian religion under whose control the old Igbo way is now undergoing rapid changes. His rash judgement and attempt to take matters into his own hands result in his tragedy. He takes his own life when it becomes obvious to him that he is fighting alone and that the community is no longer with him. The shame of this tragedy rests in the fact that the old way of life dies with Okonkwo, and the new one begins with his Christian convert son, Nwoye. Through this text, Achebe recaptures the inexorable forces that invade traditional Igbo culture, thereby causing an inevitable historical change as the people of Umuofia are suddenly transplanted into a larger *historical context* (Killam, *African Writers* 30-31). The effect of this change is exacerbated in Achebe's subsequent works, especially *No Longer at Ease* and *A Man of the People*.

The narratives of *No Longer at Ease* and *A Man of the People* are located outside the strict boundary of the ethnic nation portrayed in *Things Fall Apart*. In these texts Achebe describes a narrative of disillusionment that strongly reacts to the negative impact of the colonial history and process from which Nigeria has recently emerged as a country. *No Longer at Ease* responds to the social, cultural, and political crises in Nigeria following independence. The novel focuses on Obi Okonkwo, the grandson of Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*. The idealized vision Obi embraces while studying in England is ferociously crushed by the degree of the moral decadence he witnesses when he returns to work in Lagos. He observes his compatriots giving and accepting bribes, and he experiences social discrimination and banal issues of *tribalization*, especially when his parents express their stern opposition to his proposal to marry Clara because she is an "osu." To Obi's parents and his friend Joseph, Clara is an outcast and a heathen because

she is a descendant of people “dedicated to serve god,” and therefore she is unfit to be a wife to a freeborn such as Obi Okonkwo (65).

Obi’s disillusionment symbolizes the inability of his embattled country to develop a collective cultural space that is capable of crystallizing into a nation. His dream for a post-independence Nigeria fails to materialize because of inept leadership and the inability of the disparate elements to genuinely embrace each other or delight in their socio-cultural differences. Achebe makes the tragedy of this development manifest in *No Longer at Ease* as he complicates the reality of a political dystopia in *A Man of the People*. If things disintegrate on the heels of colonial incursion in Umuofia, Nigeria’s postcolonial condition emerges more strongly, and everything indeed collapses in *A Man of the People* after corrupt politicians delightfully betray the lofty expectations of the people. Achebe’s next novel is a story of disenchantment that responds to the mood of political and economic pessimism after independence, a period that has witnessed a lot of confusion from the political leaders. In a sense then, one could argue that the project of nation-building was put on hold, and the debate turned vociferously to issues of corruption and bad governance from that point.

To read *A Man of the People* as a depiction of the political life of Nigeria from independence to 1966 is to interpret it as a metaphor for this federation of distinct ethnic nationalities, all of which hold on tenaciously to their identities. Although Achebe does not mention a specific place in the novel, his use of Igbo names for his characters clearly suggests that the novel is set in Eastern Nigeria. There are other names that could also indicate the events narrated in this novel symbolize the trouble in another African country. However, given the political events in Nigeria at the time the text was published, there is little doubt that it refers to

Achebe's native land. While characters such as Chief Nanga, Koko, and Max represent a few corrupt, selfish, undisciplined, and desperate politicians of Nigeria's first republic, the narrator, Odili, is an educated and ambitious young man who challenges the political influence of Nanga by campaigning and running against him in the general election. Nanga manipulates his way to an election victory at the expense of Odili, but his celebration is abruptly cut short by the military take-over of the Nigerian republic at the end of the novel. The uncertainty, apprehension, fear, and gloom that close the novel were actually made manifest throughout the years during which the military took absolute control of the Nigerian government.

Soyinka is another writer whose work develops from his ethnic background, invoking legends and myths that readers interpret as representations of Nigeria's national heritage. His play *A Dance of the Forests* satirizes Nigeria's obsession with the quest for political independence, and his *Death and the King's Horseman* partly depicts the tension between the European and Yoruba cultures at some point in the history of colonialism, although Soyinka warns in his author's note that the play should not be read as a dramatization of the clash between Yoruba custom and Western civilization. Of course, there is no denying that Elesin Oba, the central personage, fails to follow through with the custom of his land when he is supposed to die so he can accompany the Oba's soul to the great beyond. The major conflict arises between Iyaloja, the chief market woman, and the District Officer, Mr. Pilkings, when the latter arrests Elesin Oba because Pilkings regards Elesin's traditional obligation as barbaric. To the British official, such a deliberate act of dying in the name of some strange custom with a view to accompanying a dead soul to the grave is both suicidal and illegal. Essentially, the play excavates the tension between colonialism and the local culture that the natives hold dear.

However, prior to writing *Death and the King's Horseman*, Soyinka had written *A Dance of the Forests* for a theatrical performance during the independence celebration (Falola and Heaton 161). Using the Yoruba cosmology and conceptualization of time, Soyinka casts doubt over the future of Nigeria, its preparation for self-rule, and ability to hold its different ethnic groups together after emerging from colonialism. The manipulation of time is a metaphor that suggests the celebration of the moment could turn sour in the future. *A Dance of the Forests* is a masterpiece in the way it codifies the sense of the past, the present, and the future of this newly independent country. In fact, the play dramatizes Soyinka's concern for the political future of his homeland. Adebisi Ademakinwa notes that *A Dance of the Forests* "juxtaposes the socio-political situation beyond the context of Nigeria's independence to spy into the future, thereby reinforcing the theme of fear" (81). For Ademakinwa, it is surprising that a play performed to mark independence should express fear over the new country's sustainability. Soyinka opts for the Yoruba tradition and concept of time to ridicule Nigeria's history in *A Dance of the Forests*. Rather than celebrate political independence, his play portrays the country as unprepared and incapable of achieving statehood in a sensible manner. Like Achebe's novels, Soyinka's plays metaphorically represent Nigeria, but they are located within the Yoruba tradition and beliefs system.

In addition to Achebe's and Soyinka's works troubling the notion of a Nigerian national literature, Ibrahim Tahir's *The Last Imam* (1984) further complicates part of Achebe's definition of a national literature as one that "takes the whole nation for its province" (*Morning* 920). *The Last Imam* is a fascinating Nigerian novel, but one that has not received any significant attention from literary critics. Tahir's text, in particular, is capable of suggesting religious fundamentalism, which the reader finds hard to relate to outside an ardent Islamic setting. Hence,

there is little or no surprise why this text is not popular with the secular interests. But when examined critically, *The Last Imam* suggests something that transcends Islamic fundamentalism.

The theme of this novel is the conflict between Islam and the pre-Islamic customs of the Hausa-Fulani people of Nigeria. The protagonist is Alhaji Usman, a character that is strategically modelled after Usman Dan Fodio. The setting is Bauchi, unlike an overwhelming number of Nigerian novels which focus on life in Lagos. Usman is trained in his Fulani compound as a Muslim scholar, and is destined to succeed his aged father as a Bauchi Emirate imam. Against his will, he takes his first wife, A'isha, "in an alms marriage" and as "a charity gift" (48). Usman soon marries three other wives. After having four wives in his household, he falls in love with Hasana, the fifteen-year old daughter of a former slave in his compound. The love Usman feels toward Hasana is genuine, but his quest to marry her contravenes the Islamic injunction regarding marriage, since Islam does not permit a man to marry more than four wives at a time. Therefore, he decides to take Hasana as a concubine, after which she bears him a son, Kasim, of whom he is excessively fond. Abandoning all his wives and their children, he treats Hasana as his first true wife. The sudden death of Hasana results in Usman's change of attitude toward his family. But the numerous complaints by A'isha and her plot to fuel a conflict between Usman and Kasim generate more personal and family crises for the protagonist. Realizing his failure to keep his promise to Hasana to look after Kasim with affection, Usman feels sad for beating his son. In order to avoid this incident from recurring, he resolves to have Mallam Shu'aibu, an extremely strict itinerant religious leader, train Kasim. Shu'aibu then reveals to Usman that he is Usman's half-brother, the product of a rape perpetuated by Usman's father. The twist to the crisis in this novel emerges during a conflict between the imam and his emir on the practices of Islamic doctrines. With the conflict also reaching its zenith, the emir feels disrespected by

Usman, and unturbans him, vowing that all other imams installed after Alhaji Usman “will be agreeable” and “much better suited for the ways of some of us.” Stripped of his religious role, Usman “the last Imam, in the true sense of the word,” is forced into submission to the will of Allah (241).

The implication of the conflict in this novel supersedes mere personal, family, and religious crises, although the imam is enmeshed in all of them. Tahir’s text is a Nigerian novel, but it does not register a collective experience of the Nigerian population. This work was published in 1984, twenty-four years after independence, yet it refuses to make a significant reference to the Nigerian federation or its post-independence circumstances. However mute the reference to Nigeria in this novel is read, the text technically highlights the disparity between the Nigerian ethnic groups. John C. Hawley notes that there are “unspoken conflicts between north and south” in the novel (“Levels” 269). Not only does the narrative imply a preservation of the Islamic kingdom of the Hausa-Fulani people within Nigeria, but Hawley also argues that “anyone from outside of that kingdom’s implicit boundaries—anyone from the south, for the most part—is portrayed as a suspect intruder and a heretic or pagan (*takfir*)” (269). Except once, in Ai’sha’s song, are “silks of the East” (49) and “prints of Yorubaland” mentioned (*Last Imam* 49). These places, which suggest the presence of the greater Nigeria, are portrayed as very distant and foreign to the strict locale of the text.

Even the colonial experience does not receive significant attention in *The Last Imam*. The novel refuses to legitimize the existence of Nigeria or the fact that the North is part of it. Tahir’s strategy denies any connection between the North and the rest of the country. It is perhaps for this reason that Ahmed Sheikh Bangura notes that “the absence of any reference to Nigeria or

Africa and the scanty reference to the Nigerian colonial experience cannot be fortuitous. It has to be read within the context of an overall denial of anything not directly related to the Islamic ideal” (185). If the text’s purpose is to celebrate Islam and ignore the other parts of the country because they are not predominantly Islamic like the North, then it brings to the forefront the role of religious and ethnic differences in Nigeria. *The Last Imam* implicitly suggests its own image of the ideal nation: a nation founded upon Islamic ideals. It is a vision that rejects a culturally and religiously diverse Nigeria. It will be interesting to ponder on all that this Islamic model entails since it depicts as pagan, “savage and barbarian” the non-Muslim elements that exist mainly outside the Bauchi Emirate or the Sokoto Empire that emerged from Usman Dan Fodio’s *jihad* (Bangura 188). Depicted as alien in the text, the South is foreign to the experience of the Muslim North, despite both regions existing within the same federal space.

So, *The Last Imam* does not take “the whole *nation* for its province,” even though it is written in English, the language that Achebe privileges as “the national language” (*Morning* 92). Does this mean then that the novel is part of a national literature? *The Last Imam* objectifies the practices of and the quest for an Islamic state in Nigeria. Usman, in particular, idealizes this quest among a people struggling between the Arabization of their being and the pre-Islamic tradition of the Hausa-Fulani people. In the novel, Islam triumphs “as a liberator and cleanser of wicked traditions” (Bangura 188), whereas the Christian missionaries in *Things Fall Apart* meet stiff resistance, especially from Okonkwo, because Christianity threatens the pre-colonial customs of the Igbo people. Both texts present an extremely sharp contrast between the religious orientations of the North and those of the South. The traditional customs celebrated in *Things Fall Apart* and *A Dance of the Forests*, albeit in the pastoral experiences of the Igbo and Yoruba peoples, are less similar to the pre-Islamic ones to which Usman is zealously opposed in the



North. *The Last Imam* cannot represent Nigeria, let alone Africa, because it explicitly constructs Northern Nigeria, depicted by Bauchi, as its main territory. In a way that also mocks the notion of Nigeria's existence as a cohesive entity, the text unapologetically ignores the fact that its setting is located within a wider social context that is Nigeria. While *Things Fall Apart* partly mourns the demise of the primordial Igbo community, *The Last Imam* has a tendency to relegate the pre-Islamic tradition "to the irretrievable past" (Bangura 187). What is even more striking about the text is the way it problematizes the conceptualization of national literature in Nigeria. As far as Tahir's novel is concerned, Achebe's definition of a Nigerian national literature is insufficient. That the text is written in English or that it celebrates the Islamic customs of an ethno-religious group in Nigeria is a point no critic can deny. However, this novel is far from being a work of Nigerian national literature because it does not accommodate the rest of the country.

If a national literature indeed writes the whole nation as its setting, there is no Nigerian writer, Soyinka and Achebe included, that has produced a national text. Besides, this definition is inapplicable to a large and heterogeneous country like Nigeria. The term "province" in Achebe's discussion is suitable for the ethnic nation within Nigeria. Each of the texts analyzed in this section embodies a consciousness that is "centred on communal values, tensions, and experiences" generated by the colonial experience (Corse 1280). Furthermore, a national literature in Nigeria could mean a literature belonging to an ethnic nation within the federation. Granted that this is the case, then we could recognize the country as an abode of national literatures. Although these (national) literatures could have common themes in their narration of the postcolonial condition, they are often fraught with the cultural perceptions of their authors' ethnicities. Their characters are disguised as national figures that are caught between their

ethnicity and the wider surroundings. For example, the social contexts in which Elvis (*Graceland*), Odili (*A Man of the People*), Obi (*No Longer at Ease*), Iyaloja and Olunde (*Death and the King's Horseman*), Olanna (*Half of a Yellow Sun*), Enitan (*Everything Good Will Come*), and so forth operate are diverse, but Amuta also argues that these characters, like several others in Nigerian texts, often “succeed more as ethnic archetypes than as national characters” (“Evolution” 93). The reason is that they always return to their ethnic origin, which precedes and supersedes their identity within the federation. Amuta notes that Nigerian novelists frequently attempt “to situate ethnic characters in a broader national framework” with a view to inspiring some level of national engagement (“Evolution” 93). The final destination of these characters is deeply rooted in their kinship. As a result of these centripetal and centrifugal movements from and into the primordial space, Nigerian texts comprise a literature of confederated units, and they are best read as comparative narratives seeking to articulate the ambiguous identity of the country, its perpetual search for meaning, and the lack of discernible closure to that search.

In fact, the main identity conflict in my primary texts is that they are largely ethnic works that are presented as national. The celebrated postcolonial critic Frantz Fanon offers another angle from which we can understand how the question of a national literature pertains to Nigeria. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, he describes a national literature as a kind of writing through which the native intellectual, who has previously “assimilated the culture of the occupying power” and turned against it, addresses the local people (222). For Fanon, the emergence of national literature is manifest in the writer’s habit of stopping to address the oppressor and starting to address his/her people by producing works that are best understood through ethnic means. The literary production of this sort takes up and clarifies “themes which are typically nationalist” (240). Assuming the phrase “national literature” might not sufficiently represent his

articulation, Fanon opts for “a literature of combat” because this is the type of literary work that inspires “the whole people to fight for their existence as a nation. It is a literature of combat, because it moulds the national consciousness, giving it form and contours and flagging open before it new and boundless horizons; it is a literature of combat because it assumes responsibility, and because it is the will to liberty expressed in terms of time and space” (240).

With regard to Nigeria, the foregoing description has two implications. First, it validates a Nigerian literature whose purpose was to quash colonialism, and cements its status as a national literature because the early writing sought freedom. The challenge, however, is that this type of writing did not have a significant existence in colonial Nigeria. I have noted earlier that *Things Fall Apart* initiates a revolt against a colonial government that wiped out the native culture. My understanding of the text suggests that it has a contrary interpretation, for Achebe’s first novel is not entirely a confrontation with the colonial power, but a celebration of the Igbo tradition and a critique of Okonkwo’s resistance to change in a community that loses its custom to modernization. The protagonist’s tragedy is a result of his fellow Igbos’ refusal to identify with him when he calls on them to fight for Umuofia. At best, *Things Fall Apart* is a specimen of resistance literature that simultaneously embraces a new foreign culture and leaves the older one to die in the past, but not a novel that incites all Nigerians to rise up for their country against the colonial administration.

Second, Fanon’s theory of “a literature of combat” validates both the celebration of a national culture and the practice of negation. By the latter, I mean the habit of one or more ethnic groups denying that they are part of a country. It could also imply the refusal of one or more ethnic groups to consent to their membership in a geopolitical structure. As Fanon explains, a

national culture refers to “the whole body of efforts made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify, and praise the action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence” (233). On the one hand, this view only partially fits Nigeria because the country did not create itself, but most of the diverse ethnic groups within it have arguably sought to keep the country as one entity. On the other hand, there are some other ethnic groups that have threatened to secede from the federation because they feel that they have been marginalized or maltreated by the others. So, in Nigeria we have a literature of combat that does not necessarily reflect a national consciousness. In the narration over Biafra or the self-acclaimed patriotic writing on the efforts to preserve the existence of Nigeria as one indivisible entity, for example, the literature of combat collides with the national consciousness, even though they are supposed to be indivisible in generating and promoting progressive thoughts in Fanon’s terms. Literatures of combat may have served the individual interests of the federated groups, but with reference to Nigeria as a collective body, a national consciousness has simply proved either inadequate or nonexistent. This reality and its impact are crystallized in the novels I examine in this study.

### **READING THE POSTCOLONIAL NOVEL: THEORY AND MEANING**

So far in this chapter I have engaged with the invention of a national literature in the pluri-national space that is Nigeria and explored the process through which the novel emerged in the country. Since my discussion is framed by postcolonial discourse, it behooves me to explain my understanding of this theory and its relevance to the overall landscape of my reading of my primary texts. It is pertinent for me to note that postcolonial discourse, as it pertains to the discourse of this work, does not assume the status of a historical or economic demarcation, but that of a literary theory. Going a step further, I read postcolonial studies as a literary marker, and not a point of rupture between colonization and its aftermath. Arriving at the most acceptable

definition of postcolonialism has been one of the most difficult intellectual endeavours in recent years. This is because the term “postcolonial,” as well as its many variations, is characterized by a series of controversies among historians and literary critics alike. In more general terms, the postcolonial—the American variant is preferred in this study—has been used as a form of demarcation between the end of the colonial process and the present. The major problem with this idea is that colonialism did not end in all the former colonies at the same time, or, indeed, has yet ended. For instance, while Ghana achieved independence in 1957, Nigeria became politically autonomous in 1960. Even more contentious is the very fact that the term suggests an “end to colonialism,” a notion that is, in reality, fraught with inaccuracy.

There is a consensus among postcolonial critics that the term “postcolonialism” is difficult to define. In his essay, titled “The Scramble for Post-Colonialism,” the postcolonial critic Stephen Slemon acknowledges the different categories that the term describes, among which are “a way of ordering a critique of totalising forms of Western historicism [. . .] a portmanteau term for a retooled notion of ‘class’ [. . .] the name for a condition of nativist longing in post-independence national groupings; [. . .] a cultural marker of non-residency for a third-world cadre; [. . .] the inevitable underside of a fractured and ambivalent discourse of colonialist power,” and so on (51; see also Ashcroft et al., *Empire* 193; Sethi 5). In addition to identifying the different categories of this field, Slemon is worried that the homogeneity of postcolonialism “within the university institution” poses a danger to the longevity of postcolonial studies. He argues that since the practices of “colonialist power differ radically across cultural locations,” postcolonial studies must address experiences of different places, especially the local, the space or level where “resistances to colonialist power always find material presence” (56). The concern Slemon has is not so much with the definition as it is with the modes of articulating

postcolonial discourses. His argument challenges my initial view of postcolonialism as ambivalent in nature, and it inspires me to read the discourse as a shifting paradigm. It also endorses my thoughts on the complexity and common homogenization of postcolonial literature.

In *Postcoloniality: The French Dimension*, Margaret A. Majumdar also agrees that the term “postcolonial” has been used “as a blanket term, incorporating widely different domains of discourse” such as in history and “the field of literary and cultural studies.” She insists that if this term is proper in the various disciplines where it is commonly found, then it is “notoriously ambiguous.” Majumdar does not immediately suggest a solution to the crisis of defining postcolonial, but she rather asks a fundamental question of whether the concept “means only the period after decolonisation, or the whole period, beginning with the first instances of colonisation and possibly including its present ongoing effects?” (xi). Interestingly, there are several answers to this query, and they are complex. For instance, while Jeffrey Nealon and Susan Searls Giroux describe postcolonialism as “the period after the heyday of colonization” (141), Peter Childs and Patrick Williams suggest that as “an historical period [postcolonialism] is best understood as a phase of imperialism” (21). Both definitions offer the idea of a time marker that ignores the pitfalls of simply considering postcolonial as “after-independence.” They imply that postcolonial is “a historical category” (Lazarus 3) or “a discrete historical moment, not a project or a politics” (Lazarus 2). Ashcroft et al. offer a different perspective, arguing that postcolonial “is resonant with all the ambiguity and complexity of the many different cultural experiences it implicates, and [ . . . ] it addresses all aspects of the colonial process from the beginning of colonial contact” (“General Introduction” 1). Although this contention suggests a timeframe between the colonial process and the present, it largely takes on the ambiguity of the term “postcolonial.” Furthermore, it implies that postcolonialism, as a consequence of the

colonial process, implicates the cultural and social experiences of formerly colonized subjects. As these socio-cultural experiences continue to exist in the postcolony, they incessantly animate the vestiges of the tumultuous colonial encounters of almost the larger part of the twentieth century.

In “Chicano Transnation,” Ashcroft argues that postcolonial “doesn’t mean ‘after colonialism’ but refers to the way colonized writers and cultural producers engage the imperial discourses to which they are subject.” He adds that the postcolonial period “begins with colonization, not with independence. Indeed ‘post-colonial’ does not refer to a state of being at all but a way of reading, a way of talking about those engagements” (20-21). For Ashcroft, postcolonial is a mode through which the colonized articulate their conditions and engage with the previous notions produced about them. What this influential theorist proposes is closer to the nature of postcolonial literature, which is used in this study as a method of reading and analyzing writings from Nigeria. As a theoretical framework in my engagement with the selected texts, postcolonial literature is not a counter narrative, but a critical examination of Nigeria’s “nationalism, since its energy and promise in uniting people to anticolonial resistance [have] inevitably degenerated” to a site of ethnic strife, corruption, and confusion (“Chicano Transnation” 19).

Although all the definitions provided above engage with the complete field of postcolonial studies, my discussion applies mainly to postcolonial literature, a theory whose “definitions and [. . .] terms of reference [. . .] are undergoing significant change,” according to E. Dawson Varughese (1). Here, Varughese suggests that postcolonial literature is slippery, that is, it changes often, in that its meaning and mode of operation derive from and apply, in

Slemon's terms, to the site of the local or cultural where its material is present (56). The idea of postcolonial literature as a literary marker is worth considering in line with the crucial views of the postcolonial critic Elleke Boehmer. In the meantime, I should note that postcolonial feminism, diasporic discourse/migrant literature, and transnationalism are prominent branches of postcolonial literature in the twenty-first century. In addition to engaging with postcolonial literary theory and migrant literature in this chapter, I will consider in Chapter Four the theory of postcolonial feminist writing.

As a literary concept, postcolonial theory was originally a counter-discourse that rapidly emerged before the end of colonialism in places such as Nigeria. Colonial literature and postcolonial literature, as two distinct entities, are defined by different and oppositional/counter tropes. There is no denying that European literature written about the empire was colonial literature. Empire literature of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries was essentially a literature of conquest whose function Boehmer rightly captures when she states that “colonial literature in its exploratory and expansionist phases proclaimed cultural superiority and rightness” (*Colonial* 94). Boehmer implies that European texts about colonized peoples and cultures only presumed to know the peoples they discussed. In this regard, the colonialist canonical text was an ideological formation that promoted subversion and, of course, commodification of the colonized subjects through which English canonical writers measured the superiority and perfection of their own humanity.

Colonialism not only enabled European administrators to have economic and political power over countries like Nigeria, but it also paved the way for European writers “to have imaginative command” (Boehmer, *Colonial* 5) over an alien part of the world that they



encountered, to a lesser degree, via direct contacts, and mostly through travel narratives, many of which are included in *Travel Narratives from the Age of Discovery: An Anthology*, edited by Peter C. Mancall. Early in their literary exploits, Nigerian writers, such as Achebe and Soyinka, strived to correct the negative image that European authors had projected about Nigeria and Africa. By doing so, they did not only “conceive of their land on their own terms, that is to represent what they claimed as their own, to invent independently,” but they also reclaimed “narrative and [ . . . ] political command” in their works (Boehmer 99). Even though Boehmer is largely right, one must not forget that Nigerian writers developed their art after their encounter with European narratives that inspired an imitative storytelling fascination and generated shocking reactions to inglorious representations of colonial subjects at the same time. Early Nigerian writers, like “most nationalist colonial writers” in Anglophone countries, overwhelmingly opted for telling their own stories in English narrative style (Boehmer 101).

Generally speaking, then, the earlier postcolonial text was a narrative response to the distortion of history and culture of the native in colonial literature. This notion is perhaps the reason Boehmer argues that the counter-discourses of postcolonial narratives “find their defining parameters in history, and, moreover, that the postcolonial draws its energy from radical critique and efforts to intervene in situations of social injustice” (7). The earlier generations of Nigerian writers were involved in this literary movement, in that they were more concerned with rejecting the hegemony of colonially constructed narratives by European writers about the exotic “Other.” The contemporary writers engage with different subjects, and refuse to show significant interest in the indictment of the colonial legacy as the substance fueling the mood of the country at this time. By shifting the blame from colonialism to the actions of post-independence leaders, the contemporary novel strategically points to a new way of reading postcolonial Nigeria.

As a way of challenging existing notions about postcolonial literary productions from Nigeria, my study reads postcolonial literature as a dialogic response within the local site, the formerly colonized heterogeneous space itself. Postcolonial theory is moving, if it has not yet completely moved, away from exploring the themes of otherness that developed through “the oppositional textual terrain of the early twentieth century” to animating the cultural and social divergences noticeable in the texts from the same postcolony. Postcolony in this case refers to the post-independence nation or nation-state (Boehmer, *Colonial* 98; see also Mbembe). The thematic concerns of twenty-first century writings from Nigeria, in particular, are imbued with disaffection with the country’s elites (Lindfors, “Politics” 22). These narratives are also ongoing interactions among the major ethnic groups that blame each other for the crises in the federation. With one ethnic group easily accusing the other of marginalization, oppression, and so on, the Nigerian novel has new material to work with. Therefore, the Nigerian novel, which once served as a part of the defining movement for independence, has now become both a platform for protest against local leadership and an agency of liberation struggles of one weaker/less privileged group—gender, ethnic, political, and so on—against a more powerful and overbearing one. Hence, in place of anti-imperial cultural nationalism and resistance struggles, we see inter-ethnic nationalisms; in place of a push for a common culture and history, we read narratives that contest/protest history and take cultural/religious differences seriously, as we shall see in the novels of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Richard Ali.

One will appreciate postcolonial literary theory more if one applies it to the cultural material to which its discourse directly relates. To claim that all postcolonial entities and the Third World territories are similarly marred in corruption, political instabilities, economic perils, social disorder, and gender conflict amounts to overgeneralization. The homogenization of the

postcolonial experience by literary critics, against which Slemon warns, has never been helpful. In fact, there have been countless attempts to read Nigeria as if it were, all by itself, Africa. For example, in his essay on *Things Fall Apart*, Simon Gikandi regards the text as a representation of Africa, to the point of claiming Achebe “invented African literature” (“Chinua Achebe” 5). Definitely, Achebe did not invent African literature. Saying he did simply implies that no one was writing on the continent before 1958. Ferdinand Oyono, the Cameroonian writer, had published his novel, *Houseboy*, in 1956 in French. Achebe’s first novel is arguably the most widely read fiction from the whole of Africa, but this point does not make him the father of African literature. *Things Fall Apart* could have popularized, but not invented, African literature.

Similarly, in her analysis of Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman*, Wendy Knepper uses phrases such as “African culture” and “African drama” when she refers to events in a small portion of the Yoruba community that Soyinka portrays in the play (134-140). One of the other obvious examples is a reference to Joseph, a Yoruba man whom Knepper describes thus: “a convert and servant in a colonial household, he has distanced himself from the community, believing himself to be superior to his fellow Africans” (136). What happens in this play does not apply to the rest of Africa, not even the whole of Nigeria. Hence, Joseph is not a representation of Africans. How can he consider himself superior to Kenyans, Ugandans, or Chadians when he does not even know the traditional practices of the ethnic groups in these countries? What Knepper does here is to reduce Africa to a small Yoruba community in Oyo in ways that we have not seen anyone reduce Europe to Dublin in Ireland or London in the United Kingdom. Her position is impossible to establish, the same way no literary critic can claim *The Death of Artemio Cruz* by Carlos Fuentes, the famous Mexican writer, portrays political

corruption in North America simply because it is a Mexican text. We must realize that Nigerian literature does not necessarily mean African literature and vice versa.

These texts by Gikandi and Knepper have contributed to postcolonial literary criticism, but in analyses like the ones they offer, one wonders what “Africa/n” means. Does it suggest a separate invocation of each of the diverse objects, places, and practices of the different peoples, languages, and cultures on the continent? Or, is it a combination of the various experiences and inclinations of the peoples into a single or multi-faceted context so much so that we have just one whole entity? This query becomes even more complex when we say Anglophone, Francophone, or Lusophone Africa. As the search for an answer is undoubtedly frustrating, so also is the absence of a clear, and perhaps legitimate, definition whenever a textual production is labeled African when in fact such text delineates, say, post-apartheid life in South Africa. To subsume Nigerian literary productions under a homogenous African literature is to suggest that the literary texts from Nigeria are not independent of the various social, political, and cultural situations that are prevalent in individual African states. In the same way that English literature does not represent all European texts, Nigerian literature should not be read as an account of the experiences of all the countries in Africa. The Nigerian novel is certainly different from its Ghanaian or Senegalese counterparts because it replicates the experiences that pertain to the Nigerian people, however diverse or contested this representation is.

Not only is the Africanization of postcolonial Nigerian literature by critics arbitrary, but the universalization of postcolonial literary theory is also problematic. It is common knowledge that India, like Nigeria, was colonized by the British. In fact, Nealon and Giroux reveal that “the first courses in English literature were” facilitated “in nineteenth-century India.” The sole

purpose was to quash “rebellion against foreign rule” and to “assimilate young minds into the prevailing orders, to confer upon them the urgent necessity of identifying with British social and cultural authority” (144; see also Viswanathan 23-24). In spite of this strong presence of British imperialism in India and the colonial experience in Nigeria, the difference between the literatures of these two countries is stark. I doubt if the concerns of contemporary Indian texts suggest a universal postcolonial experience when compared to the themes in third generation Nigerian fiction or even the works of the earlier generations. This contention implies that whereas postcolonial literary theory refers to texts from the former colonies, it does not necessarily mean that their contemporary experiences are the same and are uniformly represented in literature. To reinforce my position earlier on, postcolonial theory is no longer a counter discourse, but a literary marker, by which I mean the discourse of a literary material as a product of its own time. This view has two distinct implications. First, Nigerian writers, the contemporary ones in particular, have generally abandoned counter discourses against the West in their texts. Second, these writers fictionalize in their works the post-independence realities that are peculiar to their country. Any attempts, either past, present or future, to configure the postcolonial as a signifier of the end of the colonial process ignore the non-fixity of the concept, and they fail to take into account the fact that the former colonies are repeatedly defined by unstable/ongoing developments. Still, given the complex structure of Nigeria as a social context, it is difficult to determine what other literary framework can accommodate the country’s diversity and internal oppositional narratives.

## ENCOUNTERING THE POSTCOLONIAL CONDITION IN THE CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN NOVEL

The centrality of military dictatorships in contemporary Nigerian novels is so pronounced that I have chosen to provide a substantial, separate, but brief, account of the role of soldiers in the federal government as a fitting addition to my discussion of the image of the postcolonial condition in the primary texts that I am using. Generals Murtala Mohamed, Olusegun Obasanjo, Muhammadu Buhari, Ibrahim Babangida, Sani Abacha, and Abdusalam Abubakar were six of the military heads of state that ruled Nigeria before a return to democracy in 1999. Of all these regimes, those of Babangida and Abacha were the most disturbing. During their reigns, the generals preoccupied themselves with politics so much so that they lost focus on the security of the country (Peters 2). The military remained at the helm, but their leadership of the country was insensitive to the role that socioeconomic underdevelopment was playing in promoting crime and insecurity. This is especially true since the military regimes were so corrupt that they appropriated the country's wealth to themselves at the expense of the common people who were languishing in extreme poverty (see Falola and Heaton 241-42).

Abacha was adamant about turning his military administration to civil rule so that he could preserve his control of the country longer. By 1998, his self-succession agenda had reached its peak before he suddenly died in power on June 8, 1998 (Falola and Heaton 234). Even though they ruled the country at different times, Babangida and Abacha routinely violated the human rights of many Nigerians (Hill 33). Jimi Peters observes that Babangida was fond of "settling"—bribing—people, including the press, with the country's resources so that he could buy the support of sycophants, silence the opposition, and perpetuate his control of the federation, whereas Abacha was intent on repressing the press and writers that criticised him

(216-17). After he annulled the results of a couple of general elections, widespread civil unrest and overwhelming pressure from the international community eventually forced Babangida to step down from power in 1993. During his regime, Abacha jailed several journalists and writers for dissent, while Achebe and Soyinka went into exile. The more he persecuted journalists and writers, the more they increased numerically, and the louder their voices grew. The anger in the third generation novel comes partly from this history of repression and uncontrollable violence against the rights of the Nigerian people.

The main point of this account is to provide a useful background to the reader's understanding of the events described in the novels. The purpose is to show how these texts capture the anguish of long years of political instability in Nigeria. Except for Habila's *Waiting for an Angel*, none of these novels deals with the regimes of Abacha and Babangida specifically. However, they cover the entire period during which military dictatorships persisted in Nigeria, that is from 1966 to 1999. For instance, while Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* is a narrative of the Civil War from the perspective of a Biafran insider, Habila's *Waiting for an Angel*, Abani's *Graceland*, Ali's *City of Memories*, and Atta's *Everything Good Will Come*, re-enact, among other things, moments that (re)defined the country during the military regimes. We see in *Waiting for an Angel* and *Everything Good Will Come* that journalism and journalists are a threat to dictators. In both novels, journalists (Lomba in *Waiting for an Angel* and Grace in *Everything Good Will Come*) are treated like subversives by the military in ways that quickly recall the ordeals of anti-apartheid writers/agitators at the hands of P.W. Botha's South Africa. This is particularly true of the Abacha regime. The formative years of the third generation novelists, according to Adesanmi and Dunton, "were shaped by more than two decades of military despotism in Nigeria" (17). The incarceration and persecution of writers by army officers were

rampant especially during the years of Abacha's government. In fact, these writers were initially perceived as activists by the military rulers and their accomplices. Rather than yield to the dictates of fear, the writers, especially the younger ones, grew tougher and more courageous behind bars. Demonstrated in the prison notes of Lomba in *Waiting for an Angel* is the evidence that the third generation Nigerian novel partly developed in jail (Adesanmi and Dunton 17).

Jane Bryce identifies the necessity for a new direction in Nigeria's fiction when she argues that the third generation "novels embody the effects of forty years of failed democratic rule and military dictatorship, corruption, state violence, and war on those who were either children or unborn at the time of the events which would set Nigeria on its postcolonial path" (54). Bryce agrees with Adesanmi and Dunton that the third generation writers are greatly influenced by the social, political, and cultural realities that shaped the events when they were growing up. This preoccupation does not imply that the third generation writers break away from the earlier generations. On the contrary, the first generation initiated the tradition through which these writers could narrate Nigeria. Achebe receives great attention in this study because of his contribution and importance to Nigerian fiction. He, like his contemporaries, subjected to social critiques the Nigerian society under the colonial process. While a few of the third generation writers, notably Adichie, have demonstrated why Achebe is a great influence on their development, there are others, like Atta, who have been encouraged by the pioneering courage of Flora Nwapa, Zainab Alkali, and Buchi Emecheta to amplify the voice of Nigerian women on the literary scene (Boehmer, "Achebe" 148). Through the work of the third generation Nigerian women's novels, feminist literary discourse has taken an interestingly new turn. On the one hand, women's fiction questions the gendered discourses in the earlier texts. On the other hand, it implicates the violent elevation of "a patriarchal elite on the back of ordinary Nigerians [. . .]



especially women” (Bryce 59), in a postcolony that is characterized by trepidation, excessive abuse of power, and “endless repetition” of the ineptitude of the country’s leadership (Adesanmi and Dunton 12).

Without question, the novels I examine redefine the postcolonial identity of Nigeria, but they do not particularly question the mode through which the previous generations discussed the country (see Eze 109, 110; Knepper 197-211). The American-born British poet T.S. Eliot argues in his essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” that no new literary generation is independent of the previous ones. Eliot remarks that existing works of art are monuments that “form an ideal order among themselves,” noting that new works cannot eradicate this order, but can only modify it once they are introduced (37). The Nigerian poet Tanure Ojaide sums up Eliot’s view by saying that “the old and the new can be rooted in the same literary tradition” (73). Ojaide contends that literature is dynamic, meaning that it changes as new discourses are generated and added to it. Eliot’s and Ojaide’s perspectives apply to the Nigerian novel as well for, as Bryce states, contemporary Nigerian writers are fully aware that older novels “defined the [literary] terrain on which articulation can take place.” However, the older identities ascribed to colonial or postcolonial Nigeria by earlier generations are no longer sustainable because they “are more of a hindrance than a help to negotiating a [new] postcolonial reality” (64). Given the circumstances depicted in the third generation novels, it is evident that the contemporary writers generate a different idea, suggesting that to hold colonialism responsible for the social debacle, including “widespread corruption and inefficiency” in Nigeria today is not persuasive (King 84). “Rather than contesting or opposing [older] definition [of Nigeria by Europe],” Bryce argues, contemporary novels “enter a dialogue that allows them to redefine” the country’s identity by “using [the] terms and techniques of preceding generations” (64). This point reinforces my claim

earlier that contemporary fiction writers take their cues from the previous generations. Nonetheless, it is important to note that whereas they privilege the “terms and techniques” of their predecessors, these writers channel a different course in their evaluation of the homeland (Bryce 64).

Besides, readers encounter in the third generation novels characters that represent the real anxieties and frustrations of the Nigerian people living outside the texts as they struggle daily to navigate the hostile economic and socio-political terrains of their country. Achebe’s *Anthills of the Savannah* builds upon the military coup that closes *A Man of the People* by depicting “of the slide from reform to harsh aggressive dictatorship after a general tastes power and wants to be president for life,” but it focuses more on the main characters that are insiders of the government or players within the military power establishment (King 84). However, in the third generation novels, we do not observe Nigeria through its leaders, but through the circumstances of the ordinary citizens that we meet in the main characters.

Writing about these authors, Heather Hewett argues that “Literary traditions are constantly being made and remade. Literature [. . .] is constantly evolving and changing; and the definitions that denote categories and lineages are constantly debated by [. . .] writers” (75). Since there are new “developments, and influences that take place over time” (76), literature cannot lend itself to generic preoccupations of a particular literary tradition for far too long. In the Nigerian context, it is the always changing social realities that generate a new mode of articulating the country as a site of unending debates. Aside from the fact that the relationship between literature and society cannot be upended, literature, by its own nature, is in a constant state of flux. The Nigerian novel has changed with the society over time, and the third generation

novels should be read and interpreted differently from the earlier novels because they focus mostly on the new postcolonial identity of Nigeria with a view to drawing attention to the domestic political culture that continues to overwhelm the country long after independence.

### **WRITING THE HOMELAND FROM AFAR: THE QUESTION OF AUTHENTICITY FOR THIRD GENERATION NIGERIAN NOVELISTS ABROAD**

In spite of their concerns about Nigeria, Adichie, Atta, Habila, and Abani are certainly subject to some fundamental questions that stem primarily from the fact that they are not resident in the country about which they write. Unarguably, these authors are Nigerian, for now at least. Better still, there is no denying that their writings capture the realities and frustrations of their fellow citizens, but the general question they face dwells on whether their works are authentically Nigerian. One argument is that they can be regarded as part of the elite Nigerian writers who write in one or more foreign languages. Another argument is simply that they are diasporic writers because they live outside the country. Indeed, with the exception of Ali, they all spend most of their time overseas. Therefore, there is a wide geographical distance between them and the people whose experiences they claim to represent. This observation identifies the postcolonial burden that these novelists must deal with in their claims that they write about Nigeria's problems. I call it the postcolonial burden because the writers are caught between living in their homeland and countries that either administered or supported colonialism in Nigeria. Thankfully, this same burden adds some dimension to postcolonial fiction works from Nigeria in that it expands the argument over language and the representations of local realities by the contemporary writers.

Against this backdrop, it is important to argue that “migrancy” is one of the factors that distinguish third generation writers from their predecessors. These younger authors see and articulate the postcolonial condition of Nigeria by proxy, meaning that they are not directly inserted into the very turbulence of the social and political debilities plaguing the country unstopably. This does not mean, however, that older writers have not lived or are not living overseas, but rather that migrant literature has been most popular with the third generation writers. While Adichie is used to commuting between the United States and Nigeria, Habila, Atta, and Abani are permanent residents of the United States. A few other contemporary Nigerian writers also live in the United Kingdom, Canada, and elsewhere. It is possible for critics to argue that these writers have redefined the Nigerian novel as work written by the elite for the elite. This argument is important to consider because not many less-privileged Nigerians can afford to escape their socio-economic predicament through visas to the United States, the United Kingdom, or Canada. Perhaps, this point is too trivial since it might not fairly consider the freedom individuals have to choose where they have the privilege to live. At the same time, the question is legitimate because it initiates a connection between the writers and the people for whom they claim to speak. A similar way to explain this complex subject is that residing in the West or other developed countries creates a wide physical gap between the aforementioned writers and the disenchanting Nigerians whose pains and experiences the contemporary novel depicts. These writers, to borrow the words of Boehmer, are “privileged migrants in the West” because neither are they physically located in the environment on which they construct their social commentaries nor are they regarded as representatives of the one(s) from which they write (*Colonial* 231). They are caught between the here and there of the trends now peculiar to

postcolonial migrancy. The concern that will be addressed shortly is directly related to this point, which is the “native” authenticity of the novels published by these writers.

In the meantime, it is imperative to discuss the mode through which these novels fit into migrant postcolonial literature. According to Boehmer, “for different reasons, ranging from professional choice to political exile, writers from a medley of once-colonized nations have participated in the twenty-first-century of energized migrancy” (*Colonial* 226). This is true for Atta, Adichie, Habila, and Abani. For them, the United Kingdom and the United States, in particular, provide suitable conditions under which postcolonial and Third World writers can express their concerns about their homelands. In many cases, however, postcolonial migrant literature is a victory for the West because it brings the “Other” more closely for yet an unfinished process of scrutiny. As we read in *Things Fall Apart*, it is the Europeans that set their gaze on Umuofia, a community that would be inserted into Nigeria later. In the post-independence era, it is the inhabitants of the former colonies, which once resisted change and the presence of the white man, that now fix their gaze on living in the homeland of the ex-colonial rulers and other rich countries. The objective of the Third World citizens leaving for the West is not to civilize or colonize the former imperialistic powers. In most cases, these citizens embody their own experiences or memories of the realities that beleague their homelands. Adichie, Atta, Abani, and Habila are just four of the several Nigerian writers that elicit these memories through fiction.

Postcolonial migrant literature has often been accused of disloyalty and lack of “regional and local affiliations” at a time when many former empires are plunging or have plunged into political instabilities, corruption, and cultural derailment (Boehmer, *Colonial* 232). As irrelevant

as the argument over these Nigerian authors writing and publishing their texts abroad might sound, it cannot be ignored because it is a legitimate inquiry into the authenticity of the literary representations whose focus is contemporary Nigeria. Nonetheless, I would argue that the uniqueness of their texts exonerates these writers from the accusation of disloyalty or lack of indigenous credibility. Although the works of Adichie, Habila, Ali, Abani, and Atta may have been written in Europe or North America, they are not by any means European or North American. Irrespective of the place(s) of composition or publication—and in view of their concerns—these novels have emerged from nowhere else other than Nigeria. Similar to their predecessors, contemporary Nigerian writers are largely preoccupied with fictionalizing the social debilities clouding their country irrespective of the location from which they express themselves. Like their counterparts in most other African countries, contemporary Nigerian novelists celebrate their culture, and represent the problems of their society “in imaginative form” (Killam, *African Writers* 3). By doing this, they confirm and prove their commitment to Nigerian literature whose function has been to mirror the society and encourage a public discourse over sociopolitical problems of their native country.

In light of this argument, we cannot accuse the third generation Nigerian novelists of disloyalty. To do so would be unfair because they are vehemently critical of the quandaries that overwhelm their homeland. They are representatives of the suffering ordinary people whose voices are constantly silenced by the ruling elite. The irony of this debate lies in the fact that the ordinary Nigerians whose circumstances are re-enacted in the novels are caught up in the struggle for survival rather than the need to read. In a dialogue with Lomba in Habila’s *Waiting for an Angel*, James, an influential journalist, identifies two challenges facing this literary generation at the time their country bitterly agonizes under military dictatorship: (a) the Nigerian

masses are more concerned about living and their daily struggles than about reading, and (b) the military regime is poised to clamp down on any writer whose views are an affront to the power-drunk government (194-95). In addition to these challenges, members of the Nigerian literate population do not see the need to buy/read novels unless such works are “set as school texts.” They prefer to spend their money exclusively on basic needs such as food, clothing, housing, fuel—for those who can afford to own vehicles—cell phones, and other mundane items (Newell, “Constructions” 169). These immediate concerns hamper the wide readership of literary texts in Nigeria. Since these realities complicate writing, publishing, and reading in the country, the idea of denying contemporary Nigerian novels published abroad local authenticity, under the guise that they are published elsewhere, appears to be misguided and cynical, to say the least. These writers should be commended for finding an avenue to express the internal turmoil in their homeland, their physical location notwithstanding.

Moreover, in this age of globalization, one can properly regard these authors as diasporic Nigerian writers. In fact, does living abroad make a writer a foreigner in his/her homeland? Or does residing abroad make a work lose its appeal in the writer’s native home? Salman Rushdie, who asks similar questions, validates the notion that a work, whether diasporic or migrant, should be read as an authentic product and representation of its setting. Although literature is not interested in representing facts or validating truth, its credibility partly relies on whether a text comments on the social and political issues that characterize its setting. While contending that “literature is self-validating,” Rushdie maintains that it is the quality of a work that matters more than “its author’s worthiness to write it” (431). In part, underlying this quality are the subjects with which a work engages. Implied by Rushdie is the idea that the legitimacy of literary materials is more important than the (im)perfection of the author that uses them. The cogency of

this objection, to a great extent, is irrefutable. The personal experiences and the materials that the third generation novelists choose to discuss in their works are validated by the unwieldy social, infrastructural, and political problems by which their native country is defined.

For instance, the strife Ugwu and Ibrahim recall in *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *City of Memories*, respectively, did not happen in the United States of America or elsewhere but in Nigeria. Also, the violation of human rights and the elevation of despotism by Abacha, as depicted in *Waiting for an Angel*, did not occur in any part of the world other than Nigeria. Therefore, the contention that the new Nigerian novels discussed in this study replicate the changing conditions in Nigeria is valid. Any attempt to relocate or dislocate these novels exactly amounts to withdrawing them from the general body of Nigerian literature. Not only does such effort violate the credibility of literary productions from Nigeria, but it also underestimates and invalidates the abilities of Nigerians to write about their country from anywhere and at any time. Even this study has been produced overseas. Were it to be deprived of authenticity because of the location/base of its author, scholarship in Nigerian literature would lose a significant contribution to its discourse.

Finally, contemporary Nigerian writers have impressively handled the burden of their in-betweenness. Writing in “Nigerian Novels of 1966,” Bernth Lindfors predicts that “in the next few years Nigerian fiction will probably take some interesting new twists and turns” (31). Lindfors anticipates that new novels would provoke more national engagement than mere stories of war—reading like reports—and pastoral love scenes set in both the urban and the rural spaces. This prediction has been fulfilled by the third generation writers with their commitment and renewed energy to take Nigerian fiction to new heights. How fascinating it is that even in the



private spaces of love making, broken relationships, and dysfunctional families, we still observe the public decadence of post-independence Nigeria! As I engage in more in-depth analyses of *Graceland*, *Waiting for an Angel*, *Everything Good Will Come*, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, and *City of Memories* in the subsequent chapters, I will demonstrate how each of these novels forms a component of the entire narrative body of Nigerian literature. I will also show their interactions with each other and the Nigerian situation through the words that are written between the lines and the things that are unsaid in their blank spaces.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### WRITING THE POSTCOLONY: SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CRITIQUES IN CHRIS

#### ABANI'S *GRACELAND* AND HELON HABILO'S *WAITING FOR AN ANGEL*

This chapter discusses the instances of political, moral, and social decadence in *Graceland* and *Waiting for an Angel* by Chris Abani and Helon Habila respectively. My argument focuses on the ordinary individuals who live through the consequences of state oppression and cope with the tragedies of political instability in these texts. In order to show the disgruntlement and anxieties these novels personify, I will examine how the military dehumanize the common people through violence, poverty, and war on free press. My goal is to communicate the feelings of utter disillusionment that Abani and Habila masterfully fictionalize in these narratives. The two novels are important to my discussion because they describe the experiences of Nigerians under military rule and, in doing so, engage with a dystopia. There are other compelling reasons for which I am analyzing them in one chapter. First, both texts explore almost the same concerns but from different points of view. Niyi Akingbe remarks that as a narrative, *Waiting* “combines a grotesque irony with chillingly realistic details of the [military] regime’s propensity to employ torture and summary execution as a convenient weapon of violence and terror” (2). Akingbe’s view applies to *Graceland* as well. His point takes into account the several examples of military brutality that this chapter identifies in *Waiting* and *Graceland*. Since the two novels revisit the military years, there is not much difference between their motifs, which involve portraying military authoritarianism as evidence of the country’s political collapse, as well as a bitter complaint about the federation for failing to meet the expectations its people had envisioned on their way to political sovereignty. Ultimately, Abani and Habila take on the leadership of the

country by rulers whose approaches to governance only worsen, or rather, illuminate its social impasse.

Judging by their commitment to Nigerian literature and their understanding of the social, cultural, and political happenings in the country, Abani and Habila have proved that they are accomplished writers whose fictional explorations of the Nigerian federation contribute immensely to literature. Born in 1967 in Kaltungo, “a small town in northern Nigeria” (Habila and Page 26), Habila is one of the famous Nigerian writers of his generation. After graduating with a degree in English literature from the University of Jos, he taught at the Federal Polytechnic in Bauchi before working as newspaper/magazine editor and journalist in Lagos. Like most of his contemporaries, Habila is a staunch critic of the federal government, especially the military regimes whose inhumane acts are dramatized in his novel. He reveals that *Waiting* was meant “to be an anti-military, pro-democracy kind of book” from the beginning (Habila and Page 26). His writings generally portray individual characters struggling to cope with defeat and survive amidst oppression, turbulent relationships, societal failures, and corrupt leadership. Habila has produced several literary works so far. Prominent among them are *Waiting for an Angel* (2002), *Measuring Time* (2007), and *Oil on Water* (2010). He is the recipient of the MUSON Poetry Prize (2000), and was awarded a Commonwealth Writers Prize (for the Africa Region) in 2003 for writing *Waiting for an Angel*.

Abani has been writing a little longer than Habila. Born in 1966 to a Nigerian father and an English mother in Afikpo, Eastern Nigeria, he is no stranger to trouble in his homeland. For fear of her family being displaced or falling victims of the Civil War, Abani’s mother escaped with him and his siblings to England while their father remained in Nigeria, working with the

Red Cross. They only returned to Nigeria after the war. Abani's relationship with his father was a tumultuous one. Perhaps, there is a hint to this in the nervous relationship between Sunday Oke and his son, Elvis, in *Graceland*, even more so since their journey in the novel begins in Afikpo. In an interview with Amanda Aycock, Abani states that he wrote *Graceland* to reflect the situation in the country, saying that the novel is "full of violence in Nigeria that can almost be surreal sometimes, even though it's actually very realistic" (8). Identified by military officers as a writer and critic of the government, Abani was arrested several times in Nigeria. In order to continue his critique of military governance, he chose exile in 1999. A recipient of the Hurston/Wright Legacy Award, PEN/Beyond Margins Award, and an astute observer of the sociopolitical problems in his native land, Abani has published works that reflect everyday life in Nigeria, such as *Kalakuta Republic* (2000), *Graceland* (2004), *Becoming Abigail* (2006), and *Song for a Night* (2007).

Specifically, *Graceland* and *Waiting* expose the social iniquities that have characterized Nigeria since independence. They depict the mismanagement of power by political and military leaders, including the socio-economic underdevelopment of the country so that the problems they describe escalate the degree of fear and frustrations of the people. *Waiting* portrays the failures of military leaders to listen to the endless agitation of the populace for a more legitimate government that has respect for the rule of law, visions of individual citizens, and genuine participation of all Nigerians, especially the common people, in the affairs of their own country. In both novels, the characters that battle defeatism in the form of opposition to the ferocious practices of the government are crushed under the sledge-hammer of military cruelty.

### **FINDING MISERY IN THE SEARCH FOR SURVIVAL IN *GRACELAND***

*Graceland* relates the story of Elvis (Presley) Oke, a sixteen-year-old boy struggling to survive through the squalor that emblemizes the tragedy of his country and his family. His attempts to escape this condition through impersonation and romanticizing American culture affirm the climax of a general letdown in his country, and call into question the meaning of Nigerian patriotism. Elvis lives with his father, Sunday Oke, in the Maroko slum in Lagos. Sunday moves to Lagos from Afikpo following the death of his first wife, Beatrice, the collapse of his political campaign, and the loss of his job. In Lagos, Sunday marries another wife, Comfort, who bears him two children. Living in Maroko, he is unable to figure out what he should do next with his life. His relationship with Elvis is so dysfunctional that they frequently clash with each other. They live in the same house, yet they are emotionally detached from each other.

Lagos, which in this novel is a mini-Nigeria, fascinates Elvis because it is populated simultaneously by the very rich and the penurious. His relocation from the rural space of Afikpo to Lagos is central to the narrative of *Graceland* and the growth of the protagonist. Elvis dissects Nigeria through this marvelous urban space that accommodates the bubbles, filth, wealth, and poverty of its inhabitants at the same time. Soon after his arrival from Afikpo, Elvis learns from his father, who insists that dancing on the street is not a job, that he must wake up before sunrise and go “out dere looking for work” if he wants to have any chance to survive in the metropolis (5). Going out provides him an opportunity to experience new things. Aside from perceiving “the smell of garbage from refuse dumps, unflushed toilets and stale bodies” after a rainfall, the characteristics of the other aspects of the city overwhelm him (4). His first ride on a “molue” bus does not excite him at all. This type of bus is “unique to Lagos, and only that place could have devised such a hybrid vehicle, its ‘magic’ the only thing keeping it from falling apart” (8). Its

parts, engine, and chassis are imported from Britain, and they are made “from surplus Japanese army trucks trashed after the Second World War” (8-9). The vehicle is rugged, and it sways dangerously while traveling. On an overcrowded “molue” bus, Elvis meets all kinds of people, including loud drug vendors and preachers, but he is less interested in any of them or the products and messages they promote than finding means to survive in Lagos (10-11).

The impression he had of Lagos before leaving his hometown clashes with the city that now unfolds before his eyes. People like him, “who [previously] didn’t live in Lagos only saw postcards of skyscrapers, sweeping flyovers, beaches and hotels.” The ones “who did, when they returned to their ancestral small towns at Christmas, wore designer clothes and threw money around,” thereby impressing the villagers and making them view the city as a goldmine (7).

When he encounters Lagos and its complexities, Elvis realizes the falsity of this image. He and his father live in a neighborhood whose road “was waterlogged and the dirt had been whipped into a muddy brown froth that looked like chocolate frosting. Someone had laid out short planks to carve a path through the sludge” (6). Having no access to skyscrapers, both father and son “lived at the edge of the swamp city of Maroko, and their short street soon ran into a plank walkway that meandered through the rest of the suspended city.” Since “the planks were that narrow,” Elvis must “wait for people coming in the opposite direction” before passing to the other side each time he leaves home (6). This new experience in Lagos disappoints him profoundly. Yet, it helps him to realize that the people who travel to Afikpo to live “an expensive life,” and depart “after a couple of weeks, to go back to their ghetto lives” are not better. The Lagos he knows firsthand comprises two separate worlds occupied by the wealthy and the destitute, dirt and cleanliness, and other social binaries. As he stares at the city, he sees

“half slum, half paradise,” and then he wonders how a place can “be so ugly and violent at the same time” (7).

Elvis does not discount the fact that “Lagos did have its fair share of rich people and fancy neighborhoods, and since arriving he had found that one-third of the city seemed transplanted from the rich suburbs of the west,” but he is shocked that only those who live in the city know it well (7). He lives amidst poor people who are disregarded in the attempts to portray Lagos as a perfect world to foreigners and Nigerians living in small towns around the country (see Smith 37-39). According to the narrator, “Elvis had read a newspaper editorial that stated, rather proudly, that Nigeria had a higher percentage of millionaires—in dollars, not local currency—than nearly any other place in the world, and most of them lived and conducted their business in Lagos” (8). He wonders why the newspaper “failed to mention that their wealth had been made over the years with the help of crooked politicians, criminal soldiers, bent contactors, and greedy oil-company executives. Or that Nigeria also had a higher percentage of poor people than nearly any other country in the world.” Elvis’s concern here is that the editorial misrepresents the true experiences of the people, and that it refuses to discuss the real challenges individuals, like the ones residing in Maroko, face every day, choosing instead to “flaunt statistics” (8). Whereas this editorial is an example of the efforts to depict Nigeria as a perfect place, Elvis’s attitude toward his experience in Lagos is representative of the sense of disillusionment about life in the country. As he attempts to decipher how his world falls apart rapidly, he cannot comprehend the reason his father chooses Lagos of all places because barely “two years ago they lived in a small town and his father had a good job and was on the cusp of winning an election. Now they lived in a slum in Lagos” (6). For the teenager, relocating to Lagos is clearly a step backwards.

Nevertheless, Elvis settles in Lagos with his family quickly. As he struggles to deal with the vicissitudes of living in the city, he begins an “odd friendship” with Redemption, a teenager who is already exposed to corruption. Redemption hardly goes to school, but whenever he turns up, “maybe twice a month,” he brings “gifts for the teachers and the headmaster,” and they always bump “him cheerfully to the next class” (25). Redemption helps Elvis to grow as an individual and to navigate Lagos. The influence Redemption, a self-proclaimed “original area boy,” has over Elvis is enormous (55). He “hooked Elvis up with the spots at the beach and in Iddoh Park where he danced, and kept the hoods off him as he began what Redemption referred to as his ‘dancing career.’” Besides, he persuades Elvis to quit school “and give his art his all” (26). Redemption becomes so important that Elvis hangs “on his every word, listening as Redemption told him, at every opportunity, of his plan to leave for the United States” because for him, the ““States is the place where dreams come true, not like dis Lagos dat betray your dreams”” (26). Elvis adores Redemption, “deferring to him as if he were the elder brother he’d never had” (25). After meeting Redemption, the innocent and considerate Elvis advances faster than his age in Lagos. These two characters exemplify the crises faced by their country. Redemption is not interested in formal education because he is not convinced that it will help him get anywhere in Nigeria, and he succeeds in persuading Elvis to embrace the same view.

Forced to fend for himself by a jobless, abusive, and alcoholic father (25), Elvis works briefly as a construction laborer, “mixing concrete, molding cinder blocks and generally fetching and carrying for the masons and carpenters as needed” (28). The site manager fires him without pay for coming late, although the real intention is to cut down labor due to a low budget (72). After this incident, Elvis figures out another way to survive, choosing to impersonate his role model, Elvis Presley, to the American tourists visiting Lagos. Because this petty work does not



fetch him sufficient money, he looks up to his best friend, Redemption, who helps him to get a dance job with a musical band that plays at a club frequently visited by local gangsters and soldiers (90-93). Redemption also works here. He assures Elvis that “‘De band, and dis club, attracts rich patron, mostly Indians and Lebanese, and de band has to find good, well-mannered men and women to dance all night. You will be paid well, don’t worry’” (91-92). While dancing with a drunk Lebanese woman, Elvis accidentally bumps into an army officer, referred to as the Colonel throughout the novel, who embarrassingly threatens him (118-21). Aware of the bodily harm the soldiers can inflict on a civilian, Redemption pretends not to know Elvis, but then appeals to the Colonel to let go of the boy with the excuse that he is new in Lagos and “suffering from bush mentality” (119). At the Colonel’s command, the soldiers throw Elvis and his dance partner out of the clubhouse. He makes another attempt to re-enter the bar to dance with Rohini Tagore, the Oxford educated daughter of an Indian businessman in Nigeria (92-93), but the doorman refuses to let him in, for the Colonel threatens to close down the place should he ever see Elvis there again (162).

Elvis’s struggle to survive compromises his sense of morality. Besides having his “commercial” dancing with women at the club facilitated by Redemption, he participates in risky and illegal dealings, including wrapping cocaine for export to the United States and accompanying human parts and kidnapped children to Togo. After the failure of this trip, he and Redemption escape back to Lagos. It is then that Elvis realizes he has been working for the cruel Colonel with whom he had the traumatic encounter. Knowing full well the mischief the Colonel and his soldiers are capable of causing, Redemption goes into hiding, but Elvis is caught and is tortured mercilessly. After his release from the soldiers’ torture chamber, he goes home to find his father dead. Since there is nothing left for him in Lagos, he seeks an escape to America, the

land of his dreams. Redemption resurfaces, hands his passport to Elvis, and encourages him to leave Nigeria, but there is no clear indication that he makes it beyond the airport.

For his part, Sunday has a more serious problem to grapple with. Comfort helps the reader to understand him a bit. She complains to Elvis that his father is intent on drinking himself to death because of his late wife. She appeals to Elvis to intervene because “ya papa” wants “to kill himself to join ya mama.” So, we learn here that something is wrong with Sunday. He loves Elvis’s mother so much so that he calls out Beatrice’s name in his sleep every night even with Comfort sleeping by his side (51). As if this trauma were not enough, Sunday is victimized by the military. After hearing that the military government plans to demolish Maroko through Operation Clean the Nation, Sunday mobilizes his neighbors against the project. He regards the operation as an invitation for him to stand in the way of military brutality and prove his courage to “die like a man.” He organizes the residents of Maroko against the demolition in an effort to frustrate the government. The people’s resistance breaks down when the police respond to their stubbornness with bullets, but Sunday chooses to fight alone. At this scene, he has a strange experience, spotting “Beatrice reclining on the bench” (285). It is the ghost of his late wife warning him to leave Maroko or else “you will die” (286). Seeing the “policemen and soldiers driving people off with gun butts and leather whips” does not frighten him to listen to Beatrice’s ghost (286). His resistance meets a fatal end as he is run over by a bulldozer.

Aside from Sunday, another important character in the novel is the King of de Beggars, whose company Redemption vigorously warns Elvis to avoid. The King is a common man living on the streets of Maroko. Almost everybody considers him a nonentity without understanding the circumstances that force him to beg for his livelihood, sometimes by recruiting very young

children, like the younger Redemption, to ask for alms which they remit to him afterwards (157). He is a member of a theatre group staging antigovernment plays, and he is knowledgeable about the situation in his country. In spite of his reputation, the King, whose real name is Caesar Augustus Anyanwu, is a menace to the Colonel, who embodies the cruelty of military despotism in the country. The King used to live in the North before the Civil War. During a pogrom, he and his family attempted to escape to the East because, as he tells Elvis, “de Hausas begin to kill us like chicken. Plenty, plenty dead body scatter everywhere like abandoned slaughterhouse” (158). The train they hid in was stopped by a group of soldiers who shot and killed his entire family. They injured and left him to die slowly in a trench. After the soldiers left, the King managed to crawl out and escape to a nearby town. He joined the Biafran army purposely to look for and kill the young Nigerian soldier who murdered his family. He did not achieve his goal, and he relocated to Lagos after the war (158-59). In Lagos, he incites crowds of people against the Colonel and his junior rank officers.

The Colonel is sadistic. Redemption reveals to Elvis that “the Colonel ran the state security forces and that all other security agencies were under him, including the police.” In an attempt to give to Elvis reasons to be scared of the man in question, Redemption says that the officer “was behind the disappearances of famous dissident writers, journalists, lawyers, musicians, teachers and thousands of nameless, faceless Nigerians,” and there is a “rumor dat he personally supervises de tortures” of his victims (163). Through public speeches, songs, and stage performances, the King leads protests against the government (299). His final public address sets a battleground between him and the Colonel, who, as he eventually discovers, was the soldier who shot his family. The Colonel, the narrator suggests, kills at will, and seeing the King’s growing “media profile” irks and fills him with hate (299). During the final encounter

between the two men, the King stabs the Colonel to death before the latter can reach for his pistol. This tragic duel results in the soldiers opening fire on him and the crowd. The King dies instantly, but he achieves his desire to kill his worst enemy (302). The faceoff between these two individuals involves a revenge mission against a heartless soldier and a violent confrontation with military brutalities by one citizen.

Central to *Graceland* is the portrayal of some of the characteristics of the postcolonial condition of Nigeria, especially the challenges of living under the scourge of military barbarism. The novel dwells on the socio-politically chaotic Nigerian nation-state. Elvis is disillusioned about his prospects of surviving in the land of his birth. His dream of living well and enjoying the urban life in Lagos is constrained by the economic difficulties plaguing the country and his own daily existence. Through this character and the people surrounding him—Sunday, the King, Redemption, and so on—Abani dramatizes the extent to which social decadence has crept into the moral fibre of the citizenry of Nigeria as a result of the ordinary people's desperation to live well in a country that has much but gives little or nothing to its masses. The military, in particular, exacerbate this situation by encouraging violence. This idea is one of the most important points of this study, especially in arguing that the third generation Nigerian novel configures the country's postcolonial identity as a constantly re-definable concept that is complicated by the harsh realities that the ordinary citizens are forced to cope with every day. After listening to the King's speech at "Tinubu Square, nicknamed Freedom Square" (154), Elvis wonders "how to cope with these new and confusing times" that his older friend fails to explore in his "rather preachy sermon [that] sounded a lot like the ideas of Obafemi Awolowo, an independence advocate from the early days of the nation" (155). By mentioning Awolowo, the narrator evokes the struggle that promised a better condition after colonialism. Included in

*Graceland* are the stories of oppression, government failure, poverty, and moral degeneration. For the citizens, it is very challenging to cope with the tragedy of their federation, and so they mimic a life that temporarily obscures their real social conditions.

For this reason, Elvis's choice of first name and his impersonation of the iconic American singer explain his desire to escape his Nigerian identity. The reader might consider this adopted personality comical and devoid of pride, but it is an impersonation that is symbolic of the country's dilemma. In his review of *Graceland*, John C. Hawley notes that Elvis Oke's impersonation of Elvis Presley suggests "the larger pattern of squalor and hopeless dreams that continue to define Nigeria" (26). Essentially, *Graceland* reinforces the status of the country as a postcolony in which the life of the ordinary citizen is helplessly hopeless. The lack of economic opportunities is just one of the problems. There are no basic amenities, and quality healthcare is nonexistent. One unnamed individual helps Elvis to understand this situation when he is worried that a major road in Lagos is "littered with dead bodies at regular intervals," and no one among the authorities cares about removing them. The man responds that this "stupid government place a fine on dying by crossing road illegally. So de relatives can only take de body when dey pay de fine" (57). When Elvis demands why "the State Sanitation Department" refuses to clean the road, the man remarks out of frustration that "Dey are on strike or using de government ambulances as hearses in their private business" "but none in de hospitals or being used to carry sick people" (57). He elaborates that there are no telephones, "stamps in post offices," electricity, and water (58). Through his social critique, Abani exposes the degeneration of the country into a perilous and politically paralyzed state with an active government that is hostile toward the ordinary people like Elvis, his father, and the man described above. Most of the conflicts in the novel arise from the ongoing tension between the oppressed people's quest for freedom and their leaders'

misuse of power. The masses are politically and economically weak, and the military government devises different means to further subdue them.

In *Graceland*, poverty is one of the weapons with which the military dictators perpetuate violence on the bodies of the most vulnerable citizens. As the novel suggests, Elvis grows up in a family and in communities that are riddled with abject poverty. Aside from his father, the people that are close to him are also very poor. The fact that most of these characters live in Maroko indicates how much of a hold poverty has on them. All of them are representatives of Nigerians that do not have at their disposal the means to live comfortably. The protagonist personifies the ordinary people's daily struggles against poverty and hopelessness. He is aware that in a country such as his, you can go hungry for several days in spite of the intensive effort you make to feed yourself. For Elvis, these challenges are part of "the practical pressures of living" in Nigeria (74). On his way home from the construction site, he comes in full contact with the reality of the extreme poverty that ravages his life. Leaving the bus, he walks past the restaurant where he usually eats. He is hungry, but upon counting his money, he realizes he cannot afford to buy a meal that day (74). This picture reveals the extent of the suffering the protagonist experiences before he can feed himself. Besides, it is part of the trauma his body endures as a result of the economic hardships that are rampant in his country.

Unlike Elvis, Redemption does not live in Maroko, but in "one of Lagos's oldest ghettos, Aje." This place "was nothing like Maroko. It had no streets running through it, just a mess of narrow alleys that wound around squat, ugly bungalows and shacks. It occupied an area the size of several city blocks, and the main road ran to a halt at either side, ending in concrete walls decorated with graffiti" (51). The place in which Redemption lives evidences his poor economic

condition and underlines that, by and large, he is one of the wretched in the country no matter how hard he tries to change his life. On the day Elvis loses his job at the construction site, he runs into Okon, “the man he had fed barely a week ago.” Now Okon can afford to buy Elvis food, and this surprises him. Okon explains that he donates his blood to have money to eat: “De hospital, dey pay us to donate blood. One hundred naira per pint. If you eat well, you can give four pints in four different hospitals, all in one day. It’s illegal, of course, but it’s my blood, and it’s helping to save lives, including mine” (76). He invites Elvis to join him so that he can also make enough money to eat, a piece of advice the protagonist rejects instantly. For Okon, since the country is corrupt, and the government does not look after the ordinary people, living or doing things legally is unprofitable because it means you have nothing to live on. In other words, there is harm, rather than good, in being decent.

Not long after this conversation with Okon, Elvis decides that he must compromise his sense of morality in order to survive. Redemption succeeds in luring Elvis to join him to package cocaine for unidentified dealers. When these individuals change their business, Redemption has another job for Elvis: “Dey are paying five thousand naira each for us to follow deliver something,” he tells his younger friend. “I don’t need to know what it is, neider do you.” He adds “we are not delivering. Just following, like escort” (138). Redemption is not worried about the nature of the new job he is offered. He does not even care if it is criminal or not. In the same vein, he advises Elvis to ignore the moral implications of the tasks involved in the “escort” work, and just do things as instructed. At first, Elvis turns down the offer, but with his world getting darker and more complicated, he looks for Redemption to ask him if the initial offer to escort the unknown items to Togo is still available (194). Given his predicament, Elvis is willing to suspend all “moral concerns” in a desperate move to manage his miserable life (Nnodim 325).

He does not care who gets hurt by the job; he just wants to live because there is too much poverty in his life.

In addition to using poverty, the military government and its accomplices also mistreat the characters with physical violence. After his ill-fated trip to Togo with Redemption, Elvis is unlucky to be caught by the Colonel. His crime is not that he is an accomplice of the treachery of Redemption but that he associates with the King. The Colonel, who has never liked Elvis since their meeting at the night club, wants to get to the King through him. Beaten almost to the point of death by the soldiers working for the Colonel, Elvis feels in his body trauma that is more than agonizing. The narrator provides a vivid picture of one of the torture sessions:

The inner tubing of a bicycle tire was used to flog him; it left no marks and yet stung like nothing he knew. Then a concentrated solution of IZAL, an industrial disinfectant, was poured over the beaten area. This not only increased the pain, it sensitized the area for the next bout of flogging. He screamed until he lost his voice; still his throat convulsed. When his tormentors tired, they left him hanging there, dangling and limp. It went on like this every few hours for a couple of days. No questions were asked; only confessions were heard. (289)

This torment is just the beginning. The narrator graphically describes another excruciating form of torture to which the Colonel and his soldiers subject Elvis, both mentally and bodily. They lift, drag, and slap him roughly, not minding “the rope cutting into his wrists, knees and ankles” (294). Ordinarily, this harrowing experience is too much for a sixteen-year-old boy to bear, but the soldiers delight in his pain since they are used to torturing the civilians and violating human rights at will. After a few days of beatings in incarceration, Elvis is released from the torture room to continue his miserable life.



Elvis's hope of finding some rest in his former home after long days of trauma ends in disappointment, and he is forced to deal with the tragedy of the destruction that happened in his absence. In the process of wrapping his father's body for a possible return journey to Afikpo, he has another scary encounter with a military officer. After being slapped, beaten, knocked over, and forced to taste his own blood by a soldier guarding Sunday's remains before they are packed with the rubble from the demolition, he sees his world falling apart rapidly. The soldier even threatens to kill Elvis when he asks, with fear and trembling, to take his father's body for burial. The man insists that Elvis must pay him to claim his father's remains, and that he had better not annoy him or else "I will kill you and add you to your father" (306). Since he has no money to give to the soldier, Elvis has no option but to forgo his father and count him with the debris. His experience of the bitter taste of military brutality and abuse of power in prison, and later at the site where his father's corpse is, weakens him so much so that he starts weeping uncontrollably: "the tears that wouldn't come for his father streamed freely now as he felt worthless in the face of blind, unreasoning power. He could return later, when it was dark, but he knew the body would be gone" (306). Like the rest of the common people, this youngster is forced to cope with the soldiers' pleasure in spreading cruelties that make Nigeria inhabitable.

In order to survive mentally, the oppressed characters in the novel project their individual dignity through daydreaming. However, instead of verbally expressing his dream, Elvis imbibes in his imagination the picture of a better future through his impersonation of Presley. By mimicking a famous American figure, he demonstrates his struggle with his own identity in a country where young people have no hope of a realizable future. For him, dreaming is the only path to escaping the hostile realities in his life and country. But this is not a dream you have in bed or in your sleep. It is a mere impersonation through which Elvis devises a method to

dissimulate the condition that wilfully demoralizes his daily existence. Rita Nnodim observes that by “traversing urban spaces from the slums of Maroko to the beaches frequented by the rich and expatriate workers with their families, Elvis undergoes a transformation of the self—with the help of face powder, lipstick and eye shadow—from a subjectivity of poverty to one of escapist mimicry” (324). From the beginning of the novel, he has a strong taste for that which is foreign. Although at first “he wasn’t really sure he liked America,” he admires Presley (*Graceland* 56). Plunged into poverty since his arrival in Lagos, he seeks to transform his predicament by trying to assume the identity of or imagining he possesses the skills and status of a foreign celebrity. He feels cool as long as his conscious wearing of this image lasts and obscures his true condition.

Unfortunately, while dreaming and impersonation confirm the unrealizable in his struggle to navigate the rough terrain of his country, reality defeats Elvis in the end because “mimicry and simulation cannot take” him “beyond expressing his aspirations” (Nnodim 324). With the makeup and wig he has on during one of his imitations of Presley, the young Nigerian comes closest “to looking like the real Elvis” (*Graceland* 74), but he can only watch his dramatization in the mirror because he is too poor to have a camera. As he is lost in his impersonation of Presley, the narrator echoes the questions preoccupying the protagonist’s mind: “What if he had been born white, or even just American? Would his life be any different?” His action suggests that a positive answer to the second question is exactly his expectation. Elvis’s over-joyousness at his embrace of this thought suddenly exposes to him his real image hitherto blanketed under a gigantically fictitious identity that he consciously constructs for himself. At the dawn of this painful realization, he discovers that he looks “like a hairless panda.” He feels powerless, and “Without understanding why, he began to cry through the cracked face powder” (78). He now

understands that his impersonation of Presley to the white American tourists is as equally hopeless as the conditions of an ordinary Nigerian whose aspirations continue to fall under the insensitivity and sadistic violence of the tyrannical government of their country.

In the end, Elvis chooses to leave—or attempts to leave—Nigeria for the United States. His final action suggests that the resolution to the conflicts in his life is tied to his escaping the country of his birth. His choice prompts a curious question connected to whether or not Abani consciously makes this recommendation, and encourages his main character to romanticize and long for the American experience because Abani has been living in the United States for years. In fact, besides Elvis Oke, Beatrice, Felicia, Redemption, and the King are all fascinated by life in America. The America syndrome is so rampant in the novel that the narrator reveals that all the people Elvis “cared about were going there” (56). Felicia eventually travels to the United States to meet her husband, and Elvis seizes upon the opportunity to follow his aunt when it is presented to him by Redemption. Although Elvis pretends that he is reluctant to leave, the manner in which the narrator conveys the thought of travel to the reader is replete with contradictions. First, Elvis has “the opportunity to get away from his life” to reconstruct his destiny elsewhere. Second, the narrator admits it is not that the protagonist cannot “make it in Lagos,” since many people succeed and live fully in the city everyday (318). If people can make it in Nigeria, then why not Elvis? What is so special about this teenager that the United States is the only place where he fits in? In his effort to convince his friend to accept the America option, Redemption makes Elvis feel peculiar: “America is better dan here. For you. Your type no fit survive here long” (318). Eventually, Elvis concludes that Redemption is right; Nigeria is bad for him, hostile to his survival, dream, and individualism. This final thought compels him to

forego his life in his homeland because, for him, the United States is a better alternative to Nigeria.

More significant, Abani's choice of exile for Elvis challenges the notion of Nigeria as a habitable space for its citizens. This is not an exile that is informed by political persecution, but by frustrations and a longing for better socio-economic opportunities in a country that is full of them. The novel suggests that the circumstances in the country, including the abuse of power, are overwhelming enough to force Elvis to embrace the idea of going to America. He expresses the anxieties of a young Nigerian who experiences the country as a prison due to incessant displacements, neglect, and government hostilities. Gwendolyn Etter-Lewis gives support to this interpretation by arguing that Elvis's "fragmentation of daily living is further exacerbated by a series of devastating events: the death of his mother, his own rape as well as that of his young female cousin [by his Uncle Joseph], physical abuse, grinding poverty and imprisonment." At such a young age, he has lost everything, including his family and dignity. Trauma is all that he has left to live on. Since every aspect of his life is submerged in losses, he "is reduced to finding his own way, becoming a man in the midst of trauma" (Etter-Lewis 168). The sociopolitical system in his homeland teaches him to be egocentric and corrupt. There is no one to look after him, not even the government that is too preoccupied with its own selfish interests and deliberately breeding indiscipline so it can have people to torture, impoverishing the population, and ruining the lives of its subjects by other violent means. If the narrator expects the reader to believe that all these incidents force Elvis to escape to America because he assumes he will fulfil his ambition there, then it is important to investigate what this departure suggests about the protagonist's sense of Nigerian citizenship or nationalism.

In my reading, Abani's novel does not at any point raise this question. Neither does it concern itself with narrating a nationalist consciousness. However, implicit in the text is Elvis's gravitation toward a better world that he perceives to be utopian, or at least less dystopic than Nigeria. But to understand his reasons for embracing this option, the reader must dissect the liminal space in which Elvis and his fellow citizens are trapped. For example, while it is hard to say whether the picture the narrator paints at the scene of the human trafficking is possible, the cruel business Redemption explains to Elvis further reinforces Abani's critical mindset about the situation in post-independence Nigeria. At first, Redemption tells Elvis that "dey have paid us five thousand naira each" to help transport some kidnapped children to Togo in "government motor." Kemi is one of these kids. She begs Elvis for mercy at a stopover, but the latter "wondered why she seemed unaffected by whatever drug had been given to the others" (236). When he is thirsty, Redemption approaches the three coolers on the vehicle for a bottle of beer, but he is shocked when he discovers in the first one "six human heads sitting on a pile of ice," while the second cooler "held what appeared to be several organs, hearts and livers, also packed with ice." Both Redemption and Elvis find what they see in the coolers unbelievable, but it is "Kemi's short but loud scream" that draws a crowd (237). This business of selling human parts and kidnapping children by the Colonel, a government official, proves once more that the country is a site of moral decay. But before the reader can heap all the blame on Nigeria's leaders, Redemption quickly suggests that the ordinary people that help the leaders to perpetuate atrocities are also guilty as accomplices when he admits that "We are as bad as the Colonel and the Saudis" (243). This is not a collective admission, although it provokes some reflection.

It is easy to understand why Redemption judges himself at this point. This is the first moment he takes a break to examine his actions. Unlike Elvis who, in most cases, demonstrates

that there is an ongoing relationship between him and his conscience, Redemption hardly pauses to evaluate the implications of his choices. Elvis is never comfortable with the journey to Togo in the first place. Whereas Redemption is a typical example of a common Nigerian who is desperate to manoeuvre his ways without considering the morality lacking in his actions, Elvis is a completely powerless teenager that is compelled by hardship to gravitate toward, and indulge, albeit regretfully, in very questionable acts. For instance, when Redemption finally reveals to him the true nature of their job, and suggests that the children on board “can become prostitute in European country or even for Far East,” Elvis threatens to quit immediately because he does not “want anything to do with this” (236). This is too late because they are now in the middle of nowhere. Although both characters are disposable instruments of the Colonel, they are equally weak like their fellow ordinary citizens in the novel. Abani’s dismissal of the problems in Nigeria does not imply that he condemns the country, but it is rather a serious and legitimate commentary on the overwhelming problems in his homeland. Elvis’s choice to leave in the end is a representation of the culture and attitude of several people toward the general feeling of disillusionment in his homeland. Given the nature in which this feeling is expressed by some of the characters, the alternative Elvis imagines is utopian, but the novel does not mention if he in fact realizes his dream of leaving.

### **RESISTING POWER AND POVERTY IN *WAITING FOR AN ANGEL***

Like *Graceland*, *Waiting for an Angel* is a novel about frustration and disappointment. It focuses on a young journalist and poet, Lomba, whose association with dissidents and the ambition to become a writer collide with the powerful machinery of the military government that is intent on subverting the press. Aside from getting caught up in the totalitarianism of military force, Lomba witnesses the oppression of ordinary Nigerians by their government. *Waiting* is a collection of

interconnected stories narrated by different individuals, but all the stories recount the abuse of power and economic hardships under military rule. Like Elvis in *Graceland*, Lomba experiences torture and dehumanization in the jail where he has already spent two years without a trial. The only major difference is that, while the Colonel constructs a prison space for Elvis away from the penitentiary, Lomba is kept behind the walls of an actual prison where “there is no one to listen” (13). Whereas Elvis is kept and beaten up in a room for the Colonel’s personal vendetta against the King, Lomba describes in his diary what it means to be a real political prisoner of Sani Abacha’s war on freedom of the press and association. According to Lomba, “Prison chains not so much your hands and feet as it does your voice” (14). There, “You learn ways of surviving—surviving the mindless banality of the walls around you, the incessant harassment from the warders; you learn to hide money in your anus, to hold a cigarette inside your mouth without wetting it. And each day survived is a victory against the jailer, a blow struck for freedom” (15). In Lomba’s experience, the prison animalizes a human being. His description fits into all that he goes through in detention under the control of a superintendent by the name Muftau, who is a particularly interesting character.

Both as a threat to the prisoners and a demonstration of his profile as a federal creation and accomplice of the military, Muftau claims that for “Twenty years I’ve worked in prisons all over this country. Nigeria. North. South. East. West” (25). After the death of his first wife, Muftau, a Muslim by religion, falls in love with Janice, a well-educated Christian school teacher who teaches in his son’s school (27). One day, in the company of two warders, the superintendent visits Lomba’s cell and discovers a stack of papers in which the prisoner “had written so much,” including poems. Muftau goes berserk, seizes Lomba’s writings, orders a search of his entire room by “the two hounds,” confiscates all his belongings, and reduces him to

“a comb, a toothbrush, soap, two shirts, one pair of trousers and a pencil.” He is shocked that a prisoner can smuggle in paper and pencils to “my prison” (18). When asked by Muftau to name the source of his supplies, Lomba responds “I have forgotten.” This answer further draws the superintendent’s ire, and he supervises the severe beating of the prisoner by the other two warders. They torture him so much so that his face strikes “the door bars” and he falls “before the superintendent’s boots” (19). To Muftau and the military regimes he serves, Lomba is nothing but an “insect” in a human body that deserves no iota of respect. This is why he lands his boot on his neck, “grinding my face into the floor” to the extent that Lomba feels “a tooth bend at the root” (20). He subjects Lomba to further punishment and solitary confinement for three days for writing in the prison.

Muftau visits Lomba in his isolated cell on the third day, and the often heartless jailer is now a different man because he wants to develop a friendship with the prisoner. After reading the confiscated love poems, Muftau reproduces them in his own handwriting, and sends them to Janice, pretending to be the author in order to woo her. To make himself feel good, he even boasts to Lomba that he knows poetry and “Soyinka, Okigbo, Shakespeare” (26). He is aware of his deficiencies and difficulty to impress Janice in English because he is not educated. His English expressions are truncated or, as Lomba says, “disfigured,” something that is supported by one of his sentences: “I read. All. I read your file again. Also. You are journalist. This is your second year. Here. Awaiting trial. For organizing violence. Demonstration against. Anti-government demonstration against the military legal government” (25). We do not know Muftau’s ethnic affiliation, but he feels he knows enough English to threaten and beat up prisoners. Unfortunately for him, such disfigured English is not sufficiently good to impress Janice. So, he steals someone else’s poems and makes them his own. After exhausting the initial



set of the poems, he craves more for his love interest (27). So, he returns to Lomba, attempts to make friends with him, and removes him from the solitary cell. He promises to make life easy for Lomba if he helps him to write more love poems for Janice (28). He even commits to giving him with cigarettes, a luxury which other prisoners do not enjoy. Muftau's supply of poetry for his lover who "seemed to possess an insatiable appetite for love poems" does not last for long. After "he finally ran out of original poems, Lomba began to plagiarize the masters from memory," rewriting "Sappho's 'Ode,'" which "brought the superintendent to the cell door" (31). When Janice reads this poem, which she is aware is the work of another poet she likes, she discovers that someone has been writing for the man who wants to marry her, and she decides to visit Lomba in prison. Janice reveals to Lomba another side of Muftau, saying he "is a nice person, really" (39). She says that her coming to meet with Lomba is a response to the S.O.S messages/pattern she notices in the last five poems. He is not sure if the S.O.S., "save my soul, a prisoner," is particularly meant for her. The message "was for myself, perhaps, written by me to my own soul, to every other soul, the collective soul of the universe," Lomba reveals (38). Janice asks Muftau to help Lomba leave the prison, but the superintendent says there is nothing he can do about a dissident and political prisoner. Even though she makes Lomba's release or planned escape from prison a condition for continuing her relationship with Muftau, there are no indications he is eventually set free.

If Janice is the angel Lomba awaits, she does not save him, but he has other reasons for expecting a rescue. He wants to "recover his lost dignity" and the "self that had flown away from me the day the chains touched my hands" (34). He dreams "of standing under the stars, my hands raised, their tips touching the blinking, pulsating electricity of the stars. The rain would be falling. There'd be nothing else: just me and the rains and stars and feet wet, downy grass,

earthling the electricity of freedom” (34-35). He survives initial tortures, and accepts his jailer’s invitation for friendship to actualize this dream, but nothing happens in the end other than more misery for him. It is just a dream. Even when the opportunity presents itself to Muftau to give Lomba’s name to Amnesty International as a political detainee during their visit to his prison, he refuses, choosing instead to continue using him to win the respect and affection of Janice. What could be more selfish, surprising, and wicked? Lomba is not too perturbed by the action of his friend and jailer because he is “just Man. Man in his basic, rudimentary state, easily moved by powerful emotions like love, lust, anger, greed and fear, but totally dumb to the finer, acquired emotions like pity, mercy, humour and justice” (41). Muftau thinks it is abnormal for him to set free the man that he is commissioned to lock up and torture. In his role as a superintendent and leading of the other men who are accustomed to mutilating the bodies of other citizens in their custody, Muftau is a representative of the military government and manager of the penitentiary whose symbol exactly encapsulates the fate of powerless Nigerians.

Even though the novel focuses on Lomba, other characters such as James, Joshua, Brother, Ojikutu, Kela, and Bola, are also “Saboteurs. Anti-government rats” (20). This is why it is easy for the dictatorial government to crush anyone who rebels against its inhumane acts. Lomba dreams of publishing a novel, and he demonstrates his seriousness about this vision before military-induced violence erupts in his school. The government forces the school to close down in the aftermath of the students’ rally. His friend, Bola, whose parents and sister die later in an auto crash, is also not spared by the agents of the military government. The news of his parents’ sudden death shocks him so much so that he becomes demented, and he repeats the anti-military revolutionary comments he heard during the demonstration in his school. Consequently,

he is picked up by two unidentified government security agents, severely beaten, and dumped in a psychiatric ward afterwards.

The longest chapter in the novel is titled “Kela,” which is the name of a fifteen-year old boy from Jos. Caught smoking weed after failing his final secondary school exams, Kela is forced by his father to live with his Auntie Rachel in Lagos. There, he meets new interesting people, including the intellectual and articulate Joshua. Auntie Rachel hires Joshua to instruct Kela in English and literature in preparation for another set of exams. These two individuals, Kela and Joshua, develop a close relationship, with the former systematically growing as Joshua’s protégé. He meets Joshua’s love interest, Hagar, who used to be Joshua’s bright student, but now faces emotional and psychological problems. After the death of her father, her mother remarried another man who made amorous advances toward her. When Hagar reported this to her mother, the latter chose to believe the lies of her abusive and drunk husband. Thereafter, Hagar’s mother banished her from the house, and forced her to live waywardly in a Lagos brothel in the process. This experience and her lifestyle make it difficult for her to return any true affection from Joshua. She considers herself a thing of the past, “an appendix: useless, vestigial, even potentially painful” (156). Joshua, she says, is possibly a political figure waiting to surface if democracy returns to Nigeria. She concludes that he deserves a better woman, and not a prostitute like her. Kela’s awareness of this affair helps him to understand and predict the tragedy that is set to befall his new friends and the journalist, Lomba, at the hand of military power.

Another important character is Auntie Rachel, who has a restaurant that she names “Godwill.” Rachel is the eldest sister of Kela’s father and she is now entrusted to help the

teenager understand “what life is really like” in Lagos (146). Rachel drinks secretly, has no children, and no husband because her love life has been complicated since the man she eloped with from Jos “died at Nsukka, fighting the Biafrans” (140). Another man that proposed to her, her landlord in Lagos, Alhaji Sikiru, “was burnt inside his car in Ajegunle,” a popular district in Lagos, by protesters who “thought he was a northerner” (146). She tries to cure her trauma with alcoholism. All of the individuals Kela spends a lot of time observing in this chapter congregate on Morgan Street, also known as Poverty Street, the scene of the most troubling violence in the novel. This street serves as a stage for the battle between the government and the ordinary people. Also, it is a place where we encounter the desperation of these people to survive each day. The residents of this neighbourhood, which bears some resemblance to Maroko in *Graceland*, are fed up with the “foreign” name of their street. They collectively conclude that Morgan Street does not reflect their true condition, which is characterized by destitution, turmoil, and filth. In addition to Joshua, Kela, and Auntie Rachel, Brother and Ojikutu, also known as Mao because of his obsession with the Chinese leader, are famous people on Morgan Street. Brother’s “real name is Mohammed. He is from the north, though he has lived here [in Lagos] all his life” (134).

As a teacher, Joshua is well known, and he is considered intelligent by most of his neighbors. He leads the people to change the name of their street to Poverty Street during a demonstration Lomba accepts to attend and report on as a journalist after a few persuasive words from James Fiki, the editor of a newspaper called *The Dial*. He is also a critic of the government. Lomba recalls that two years earlier James “had met me in my lecturer’s office, submitting an essay titled ‘The Military in Nigerian Politics’. He had sat in the corner, listening to me elaborate on my essay” (111). After discontinuing his university education because of riots and “the

incessant closure of the schools,” including the condition of his “room-mate who went mad,” Lomba finishes writing a novel he intends to publish through *The Dial*, but James tells him he is interested in “articles and reports, not a novel.” When the former asks why a talented young man like Lomba quit school, he is reluctant to go into details, saying instead because “school began to look like prison, I had to get out” (112). James, who eventually hires Lomba to write for the newspaper, represents the Nigerian press in this novel. His confidence in addressing the problems with the country and the role of the press in exposing the misdeeds of the military inspires Lomba, and it convinces him to accept Joshua’s invitation to attend the rally on Poverty Street eventually. This demonstration doubles as an opportunity for the people to protest against their social impasse at the Government Secretariat.

As if the socio-economic conditions ravaging the lives of the residents of Poverty Street were not enough, the Sole Administrator orders his armed men to violently clamp down on the protesters for demanding that the government pay attention to their plight. Because they are citizens struggling to survive and coping with hardships, the inhabitants of Poverty Street are intent on making the military government aware that “our children and our wives are dying from diseases,” and everyone is “dying from lack of hope” (174). Unfortunately, Joshua and his fellow protesters are not fully aware that they are up against a government that is not only insensitive to the poor living conditions of the governed, but one that also finds the people’s audacity to peacefully express their displeasure at the government’s neglect of them absolutely intolerable. At the Secretariat, the protesters find themselves trapped before a dictatorial military administration that accommodates no peaceful dialogue, confrontation, and outcries against the oppressors’ inhumane attitude toward the daily existence of the oppressed.

Suddenly, the peaceful demonstration is turned violent by the anti-riot police that refuse to restrain themselves from arresting, shooting, and indiscriminately killing the unarmed agitators. Among the casualties of this cruelty are Hagar and other people, “mainly women and children” (177). Also, revolutionary characters like Ojikutu and Brother make their final departure from the novel after the protest turns ugly. Possibly, they too, like Hagar, are killed by the anti-riot police. All that Kela has left in his memory is the protest with its tragic outcome. Toward the end of his narration, this young character recalls that to this day, “many years later, the distinct sounds of the violence echo in my mind whenever I think about it. I can still hear the thud of blows, the oomph! of air escaping the mouths and the shrill, terrified screams of women” (177). Troubled by the abrupt ending of the demonstration, Joshua sadly admits to Kela that the messy outcome of the rally catches him by surprise. He goes into hiding from the soldiers who want to arrest him because they know the kind of risks he represents for the country. In the presence of Auntie Rachel, two men from the State Intelligence question Kela about Joshua’s whereabouts. He tells them he is gone to Warri to find Hagar’s family and inform them their daughter is dead. Joshua, Kela confirms, has no specific destination after Warri, and he is not returning to Poverty Street because life there without Hagar is meaningless.

Through the disastrous consequences of the protest at the Secretariat, *Waiting* recounts more despotic practices of the military government. After the rally, Lomba recalls his reluctance to grant Joshua’s request for him to cover the demonstration. But more importantly, the chapter describes the persecution of journalists and writers by military dictators. The government mistreats the masses, and regards the media as a threat to its inhumane practices because, according to James, “every oppressor knows that wherever one word is joined to another word to form a sentence, there’ll be revolt. That is our work. The media: to refuse to be silenced, to

encourage legitimate criticism wherever we find it” (198). But James and Lomba soon realize that the military government is bent on silencing the media. The first step the soldiers take toward their inhibition of free speech and anti-military journalism is their assassination of the founding editor of *Newswatch*, Dele Giwa, through a letter bomb, for speaking out against the regime. Some of the reporters/writers, including James and Lomba, who manage to escape the initial attempts to arrest them lose their office(s) to military incendiarism. They all take cover in the house of Emeka Davies, a friend of James’s and a poet, writer, and an outspoken member of “the underground pro-democracy group, NADECO (National Democratic Coalition)” (212). This gathering at Emeka’s house, for shelter and solidarity, does not elude the searchlight of the army officers either. Lomba manages to avoid being caught by the soldiers when they invade Emeka’s house to arrest the dissidents. However, his escape from the house does not last very long as he is arrested by agents of the government after the demonstration at the Secretariat turns sour. Since the reader is not sure what happens to Lomba in the end, his fate and that of the other characters in the novel show the country as a chaotic entity run by a ruthless government.

The plotting of *Waiting* refuses to follow a chronological pattern. Although this style, in large part, detaches the stories in the text from each other, it ultimately symbolizes the chaos, divide, and fragmentation in post-independence Nigeria. In animating these social ills, Habila’s novel focuses on the years of military dictatorships and their impact on the lives of ordinary people. The aftermath of the dictators’ obsession with power includes violence, widespread poverty, and squalor. Through the style in which these subjects are represented in his novel, Habila further elevates the discourse about the postcolonial identity of Nigeria by demonstrating the disconnect between the citizens and their leaders. Central to the concern of the text is a re-enactment of the overwhelmingly bitter experiences during military regimes in Nigeria in the

1990s. In the afterword, Habila admits that the period referenced in the narrative “was a terrible time to be alive, especially if you were young, talented and ambitious—and patriotic” (223). This is because, military dictatorships, especially during the times of generals Abacha and Babangida, were brutal. The text also alludes to the killing of the popular author and human rights activist, Ken Saro Wiwa, the assassination of Kudirat Abiola—wife of Chief M.K.O. Abiola, winner of the 1993 presidential election annulled by Babangida—and Dele Giwa, founder and editor of the weekly newsmagazine *Newswatch* during the military era. Despite these events being randomly described in the book, the reader is able to connect them with each other to imagine what it meant to live in Nigeria under military rule. These military officers complicate our understanding of Nigeria through the features and dehumanizing practices of their governance.

Similar to *Graceland*, military rulers and their accomplices deal with ordinary people through impoverishment, violence, and suppression of free press in *Waiting*. First, poverty has a strong impact on the materially and politically powerless people in this novel. In fact, Habila seems to focus more on poverty in his novel than Abani does in *Graceland*. Although both works resonate with each other on the amount of poverty that the people experience daily, the major characters in *Waiting* take this reality to a higher level when they resolve to rename their thoroughfare Poverty Street. Like their neighbors, Joshua, Ojikutu, Hagar, and Brother cannot afford to live well in the country. Prior to renaming their street, Joshua and his neighbors attempt to draw the Sole Administrator’s attention to the real characteristics of their habitat. They lack medical facilities because their “clinic is run-down and abandoned.” They have no access to water because they “don’t have a single borehole on Morgan Street.” Their “schools are overcrowded” and their “children have to buy seats and tables” in their classrooms “because the ones there have not been replaced since the schools were built ten years ago!” (173). Joshua



complains to the Sole Administrator about the lack of the basic social on this street. To the Administrator, who never appears throughout the protest, Joshua's complaints merely arise from a feeling of entitlement that has no place in a dictatorship.

In addition to this lack of facilities, the perpetual presence of military officers in politics worsens the conditions of the people. James attests to this wild cycle of governance in his dialogue with Lomba: "One General goes, another one comes, but the people remain stuck in the same vicious groove. Nothing ever changes for them except the particular details of their wretchedness" (113). Rather than improve the people's standard of living, the leaders are more concerned with clinging to power. For the inhabitants of Poverty Street, fighting against abject poverty and widespread "injustice, no matter the consequence," or decrying the government's neglect of the common people is a desperate action that their rulers regard, unfortunately, as an act of indiscipline (168). The junta treats every attempt it suspects challenges its despotism as confrontational and disrespectful. As a witness to several cruel military actions, Auntie Rachel knows that no rally is peaceful to despots in a country that is governed by draconian laws. When she advises Joshua to desist from leading the Poverty Street demonstration, her voice is "low and sad and full of memory." "Look around you," she warns Joshua, "can't you see they are desperately looking for someone to shoot or lock up? Don't give them the chance" (164). Auntie Rachel regards the military as a group of bloodthirsty dogs that capitalize on every instance of law breakdown—even though there is no rule of law in the country—to violently destroy the bodies of their victims for being obstinate. Her perception of Ojikutu's militancy as foolish and Joshua's decision to lead the protest as a suicidal mission is informed by her experience that trouble usually breaks out. On a separate occasion, James notes, "The military government doesn't take kindly to such things" as demonstrations and freedom of speech (193). Auntie

Rachel's fear affirms that Nigerian soldiers have a zero tolerance for opposition from the civilian population.

Unbeknownst to Auntie Rachel, she echoes the Cameroonian postcolonial critic Achille Mbembe when she warns Joshua against leading the protest, knowing full well that the military government will react violently to the rally. According to Mbembe, between the rulers and their subjects, "confrontation occurs the moment the *commandment*, with vacuous indifference to any sense of truth, seeks to compel submission and forces people into dissimulation" (8). The kinds of rulers Mbembe has in mind here are the ones that feel threatened and disrespected whenever their subjects demand better treatment and responsible leadership. The Nigerian military government, as depicted in the novel, fits well into this description because it does not enshrine any laws that can protect the rights of the citizens. Instead, the regime takes delight in ruling with laws that oppress the people and force them to be silent on their living conditions. When Joshua, Brother, Ojikutu, and their supporters think they can change this reality, they face more lethal consequences. Sankara, the students' union leader in Lomba's school, and his fellow students suffer a similar fate when they are beaten up by soldiers early on for protesting against corruption and injustice perpetrated by the military.

Both incidents confirm Auntie Rachel's fear that the government always instigates trouble whenever the common people protest. Shortly before the protest and the killings, James legitimizes this concern, telling Lomba that "in our country there cannot be a peaceful demonstration, the troops will always come, there will be gunshots, and perhaps deaths" (195). Yet, Joshua insists that the rally aims "to draw the government's attention to our plight" (193). Indeed, Lomba and Kela relate the events that validate this point in the third and sixth chapters.

Even more troubling is the fact that a young person like Kela continues to live with the trauma of the gory scene of the demonstration at the Secretariat. This youngster is not a direct victim of military violence on the protesters, but he learns very early that the sanguinary leaders of his country are determined to rule with terror and a murderous state apparatus comprising the police, soldiers, and the other accomplices of the military regime.

In order to overcome despotism, the citizens struggle to find the means to live as human beings. Since the military power meets the people with terror and agony whenever the former call attention to their predicament, the ordinary citizens attempt to overcome or cope with their destitution in a unique way. Habila's characters suffer from the lack of a "good" government. So, they resort to daydreaming as their only escape from the social and political conditions that overwhelm their daily existence. *Waiting*, in this sense, is not just a narrative about life on Poverty Street, but it also captures the struggles of the common people to survive in a country dominated by militarism and social iniquities. According to Nnodim, Habila's novel "maps Morgan Street, also known as Poverty Street, as a microcosm of destitution" (326). Nnodim suggests that experiences of the people living in this place are worrisome, and indicate a much bigger problem. Poverty Street represents Lagos and Nigeria, mirroring the worst socioeconomic conditions in the country.

In this environment, life is very tough, and the chances of survival continue to fade day after day. The helplessness of the people forces them to dream big because, as Joshua tells Kela, "people become dreamers when they are not satisfied with their reality, and sometimes they don't know what is real until they begin to dream" (121). Joshua implies that dreaming on Poverty Street is a consciously constructed escape that is not real. For example, Brother, a former

driver and now a tailor, chooses to dream in an effort to forget his abject poverty. He believes his condition is destined to “magically” transform itself on the day he will celebrate his divorce from poverty. In his anticipation of that day, when Allah will give him a million naira (129), Brother cheerfully declares to his neighbors:

I go throw send-off party. My send-off from life of poverty. I go repaint every house for this street. I go hire labourers to sweep everywhere till everything de shine like glass. All of us go wear *aso-ebi*, fine lace, and Italian shoes. The Military Governor and the Local Government Sole Administrator—all go come here. I go pay Teacher Joshua to write my speech for good colo English [. . .]. We go eat and dance and drink and smoke fine imported *igbo* from Jamaica [. . .]. Then finally I go stand before the TV people dem for final handshake with Poverty. “Oga Poverty,” I go say, “we don finally reach end of road. We don dey together since I was born, but now time don come wey me and you must part. Bye bye. Goodnight. *Ka chi foo. Oda ro. Sai gobe.* (130)

At this point, Brother is caught up in a tight grip of hallucination, especially considering the extent of his lack of regular and dependable means of livelihood. His dream is too grand and unreal to be normal. Yet, it is a form of escape from the circumstances that complicate his existence. Symbolically, his daydream is an indictment of the military government for failing to provide an enabling environment for him and his fellow citizens to live comfortably.

According to Ali Erritouni, the oppressed people in *Waiting* understand that the prospect of a meaningful life under the harsh circumstances in which they are trapped involves romanticizing “the prospect of a better future.” Characters like Brother embrace “daydreams in

an effort to envision solutions to the political and social ills afflicting Nigeria under military rule” (154). Brother is not the only one that believes in the possibility of a better future in which he will have a life of affluence, his neighbors also do. The people he addresses are also ordinary citizens comprising bus conductors, bricklayers, and so on sharing a similar experience with him on Poverty Street. They cheer Brother’s rehearsal of his celebration of freedom from poverty because they imagine that day will almost likely bring them fortunes as well. Although “Brother’s dream may seem idle [. . . ], its central objective [. . . ] is to imagine a tentative solution to the decay and negligence that have engulfed the neighbourhoods, houses, schools, and public buildings in Nigeria as a result of military mismanagement [of power] and corruption” (Erritouni 156). Since the military government is not prepared to pay attention to the problems of the common people, Brother can only seek a temporary solace in a reality that is extremely far from his grip. He and his neighbors on Poverty Street look for and revel in distractions from their misery, pretending that the crises that victimize them are not real. Unfortunately for Brother and the anticipated beneficiaries of his imagined transformation from poverty to wealth, his dream never comes to fruition. It can never see reality in a land where the military rulers quash every vision and aspiration of the people.

Moreover, Brother’s daydream should be regarded as a satire on the colossal failure of Nigeria to pursue, let alone realize, its nationalist agenda after independence. Joshua also takes a direct swipe at Nigeria’s failures when he complains that ““In a normal country there wouldn’t be a need for revolution; there wouldn’t be a Poverty Street; well, not like ours, anyway. People like me would be able to teach in peace, live in peace [. . . ], and maybe fall in love and marry and have kids and die old”” (162). Here, Joshua describes the exact opposite of the characteristics of his land. In his reasoning, he seeks an alternative to Nigeria, but all indications

point to the fact that he is trapped and forced to cope with the anomalies that bewilder and disappoint him. He imagines what Nigeria ought to be, the pleasant world promised during the nationalist struggle. He is sad that instead of living in that “normal country” assured in the build up to independence, he lives in a destabilized one whose leaders and citizens are constantly at war with each other. There is no end to Joshua’s frustration, hence he, Lomba, and the people on Poverty Street have to embrace “dreams as part of reality” so that they can manage their collective ordeal. But “dreams are never realized” in their country because “something always contrives to turn them into a nightmare” (167). The amount of political, economic and social oppression forces Joshua and his neighbors to believe in nothing, not even in their own dreams, and those of their country, because they soon turn out to be mere imaginations.

Unlike *Graceland*, in which Elvis is interested in the idea of leaving Nigeria for America, Lomba does not think of exile until just before the demonstration. We read about the possibility of him leaving the country for the first time during the brief encounter between Lomba and Mahalia, the woman who helps him to escape from the soldiers that storm Emeka’s house. Strangely, Mahalia encourages Lomba to “try and get arrested.” For her, this is not only “the quickest way to make it as a poet,” but she also believes that Lomba will “have no problem with visas,” and “might even get an international award” if he declares himself an asylum seeker, and if he claims he is a victim of political persecution in Nigeria (218). She thus embraces the notion that getting “out of this fucking country” easily is tied to one being a writer and an activist (221). Even though Lomba provides an ambivalent response to this notion, Mahalia’s suggestion emanates from her understanding of the idea of exile as a path to quick fame. Prior to this conversation, James also advises Lomba to leave the country for “London, or America. You’d fare better than me, you are still young” (220). James rejects the idea of living in exile, although

he confesses that he once thought about it (219). A huge confusion is implicit in James' rejection of Emeka's offer. He says he "can't live in exile, in another country" because he is old, and cannot afford to wash "dishes in a restaurant to make ends meet." Nevertheless, he encourages Lomba to run away from Nigeria and the military persecutors. Does he mean to suggest here that Lomba can—or is fit to—do dishes "in some cold, unfriendly capital in Europe, or America" in order to survive? (219). Or, does James imply that exile is a ridiculous option? On the one hand, these pieces of advice read like sound bites legitimizing asylum in America and England as alternatives to living in Nigeria. On the other hand, they express the dilemma of the characters that are caught between the idea of combating the squalor in their country and the thought of escaping for economic advantages, safety, and freedom from political oppression.

As bleak as the option of exile appears, the reason Habila romanticizes it arouses curiosity. If he intends to justify the idea that leaving the homeland is a viable option for his main characters that are implicated in the social perils of their country, does he do so because he, like a few other third generation Nigerian writers, is based overseas? Although the novel does not suggest any clear answers to this question, it is pertinent to interrogate the idea of writing as a form of protest or as a means to facilitate exile. What is more important in this novel, however, is the attitude of the characters toward their native land. Joshua does not regard Nigeria as a *normal* country due to the experiences of the people at the hands of the military leaders. He does not suggest traveling out of the country, but his attitude corroborates the general mood of Nigerians in the novel who are disillusioned about the notions of citizenship and national leadership. While James intends to express this mood for the protection of a young writer persecuted by the government, Mahalia does so for selfish reasons. It is not clear which of the suggestions Lomba ultimately validates since Habila's text does not mention what eventually

happens to him in prison. Unlike in *Graceland*, in which Elvis glides toward an airliner's gate to America, Lomba's last appearance in *Waiting* is in a penitentiary in Nigeria.

Indeed, the circumstances of the characters in these texts raise a series of interesting questions, notably about what it means to be Nigerian. In their oppression of the ordinary people, the military/political authorities claim to protect the country from saboteurs. On their part, these citizens believe that they confront the military dictators in order to expose the latter's errors, failures, corruption, sadism, dishonesty, and violation of the country's integrity. Determining which of these parties truly represents the interests of Nigeria is complicated by the uncontrollable and unbearable tragedies in these texts, including their implicit or explicit suggestion of exile as an escape route. The military rulers arrogate to themselves the task of protecting the country at the expense of the peace of their subjects. The narrators in *Waiting* and *Graceland* express sympathy toward the oppressed characters more than for the soldiers. One way to examine this point is to consider the fact that all the narrators in *Waiting* are participants in the events in the novel and are victims of the military. In contrast, the omniscient narrator in *Graceland* speaks as a witness to the problems in the country. Not only does the tension between these characters and their authoritarian leaders imply political failure, but their lives, as well as their relationships, also reflect the lack of cohesion and hope, and satisfaction in the country. Either side is capable of justifying its struggles as steps taken in the interest of the country. Still, there is no denying the argument that all the characters are victims of a political tragedy that results from insensitive leadership in their country.

Furthermore, the conditions faced by the characters constitute a path to critiquing the military abuse of power. The incidents that hamper the existence of the ordinary people highlight



the dehumanizing practices of the military regimes that crush any attempts to challenge their corruption and authoritarianism. In fact, the social, political and economic realities that prompt the inhabitants of Poverty Street and Maroko to dream and try dignifying their existence transcend penury. Poverty Street, like Maroko, is populated by many Nigerians who are talented but have no means of living free and happily. People, such as Ojikutu and Joshua, are citizens whose future hangs in the balance because of the problems in their country. For example, Sunday and the King are at loss with their livelihood. The former's ambition to become an elected official is difficult to accomplish since he cannot "afford much of a campaign team or gifts" (*Graceland* 178). No wonder, he loses his election bid—after his resignation from his job and a huge investment in his ambition to become a governor—to his opponent, Okonkwo, who can afford to lure the impoverished people of Afikpo into voting for him with petty materialism. Lomba, who spends two years on Poverty Street "locked in [. . . a] room" of a "tenement house, trying to write a novel," eventually abandons his dream for obvious reasons. He fully understands the precarious situations of his wretched neighbors, and realizes that the government is intent on destroying every element of opposition to its inhumanity and neglect of the common good. During his time on Poverty Street, Lomba has to teach "English and literature an hour daily, minus Sundays, in a School Cert. preparatory class" for his daily survival (*Waiting* 110). His experience is a testament to the limitations poverty and poor governance place on ordinary people in spite of their dreams. For individuals like Lomba, Joshua, and Ojikutu, the military era of the 1990s, Habila laments in the afterword, was dehumanizing and sad to witness (223). No wonder that his novel concretizes the damaging effects and legacies of that period in Nigeria.

From the foregoing discussion, it is clear that both *Graceland* and *Waiting* depict turbulent times in Nigeria from the 1960s to the 1990s. These texts bemoan the disappointment

of the citizenry after the collapse of the nationalist dream. More importantly, they portray the fates of the people struggling to navigate the hostile social, economic, and political terrains of a space that is legitimately their own. Besides, the novels narrate stories of individual characters living with common experiences in an unstable sociopolitical landscape. More cogently than their literary predecessors, Abani and Habila describe Nigeria as a site where the postcolony manifests its character to the fullest. Irrespective of the army officer ruling the country, the government is nothing but brutality and anguish stemming from what Mbembe terms “the banality of power” (3). The torture, pain, and poverty the people suffer from do not make their country a just society. Nothing ever improves; everything continues to get worse instead. In spite of Nigeria being “a major producer of oil” that should be capable of feeding its citizens and providing them basic social amenities, James complains to Lomba that the people have “lost all faith in the government’s unending transition programmes” (113). The people whom James alludes to are the individuals trapped and “forgotten in the stymied, sense-dulling miasma of existence” (110). These individuals are the ones whose experiences both *Waiting* and *Graceland* fictionalize. Their dreams to survive and live better are at odds with the governments’ unending desire to affirm their will to absolute power. Sadly, the consequences of this obsession with power are repeatedly devastating to the common people and their human dignity.

In addition to exemplifying Nigeria as a site of “endless repetition” of political tragedies, Habila and Abani bring their understanding of their native land as a postcolony to bear on the intertextual references between their novels (Adesanmi and Dunton 12). In large part, their texts cover the political conditions of the federation under the military, but they also indict the early post-independence politicians for the debacle that continues to define the postcolonial identity of the country. We do not encounter Shagari, Buhari, Obasanjo, Babangida, and Abacha, in

particular, as characters in the novels, but the last two leaders, Ali Erritouni contends, “subjected Nigerians to an unadulterated brutality.” Both novels equally represent each regime as “a will to power that admits of no inhibitions to its exercises” (147). These claims are substantiated by the practices of the military rulers that are still infamous for corruption and violent repression of the people’s rights through “the police, soldiers, security agents, and the penitentiary,” the apparatuses Erritouni defines as “the instruments of [. . .] brutality” (147). In these texts, the military dictators and their agents express no appeal to humanity, morality, and compassion. Instead, their despotism is “infatuated with its own excesses and regards the bodies of its opponents as a site on which it may inscribe its unrestrained force, subduing, mortifying, and obliterating them” (148). The texts support Erritouni in their depictions of the soldiers’ and police’s manhandling of the main characters. In the Afterword to *Waiting*, Habila describes the characters’ ordeals as moments of “despair [. . .] under a] prison-like atmosphere” that is further contaminated by the abuse of power, bribery and corruption, indiscriminate killings of political opponents, including human rights activists, and several innocent citizens (229). In *Graceland*, an unnamed character shares this sentiment with Habila during a risky public speech when he labels Nigeria as a prison ruled by “infernal, illegal and monstrous regime of military buffoons” (156). While both instances do not necessarily construct physical prisons in my reading of the novels, they still capture the trauma that became part of living in Nigeria during the military years.

Finally, *Graceland* and *Waiting* mourn the collapse of the nationalist agenda in post-independence Nigeria so much so that one wonders where the anger against the country’s condition stops. Prior to independence, Nigerians had dreamt of a country that would gravitate toward respect for people’s freedom, rights and, social wellbeing. It was a popular dream

promoted by the activities of the so-called nationalist leaders. It is not surprising, then, that we see in these novels characters that continue to dream in spite of their unfavourable social conditions and widespread disappointment. However, their dreams do not stem from a desire to be free from the bog of colonialism or to unite the country around a common good that is devoid of ethnic sentiments. This time, the characters dream of escaping from the political/military leadership failures that do not only beleaguer their country, but that also subjugate their daily existence under unpopular militarization of the country (Akingbe 29). In both novels, the ordinary people are forced to endlessly combat dictatorial regimes of self-aggrandizing national leaders who are determined to sustain their preposterousness. The tyranny imposed on these people reflects itself in the social, political, cultural, economic, family life, and every facet of the country, consistently remapping Nigeria as a postcolony, a political dystopia, and inevitably vivifying the strong presence of the country's postcolonial condition. It is fascinating that both Habila and Abani link the power relations between Nigerian leaders and their subjects to the prevalent discourses in their novels studied in this chapter. Perhaps, one way to dismiss the validity of this argument is to indict again the colonial process for the amount of sadistic violence the military dictators and their accomplices physically and mentally inflict on the bodies of the people they are supposed to protect. It would be interesting to know how effective such counter-argument would read later in the twenty-first century. Meanwhile, this chapter has described the representations of the daily reality in contemporary Nigeria from the perspectives of men, but examining the same situation through the lens of women in Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come* is worthwhile.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### GENDERING THE DISCOURSE OF DYSTOPIA: REVOLT AGAINST DOUBLE TYRANNY IN SEFI ATTA'S *EVERYTHING GOOD WILL COME*

Like Habila's and Abani's, Atta's writing career is fascinating. Born in 1964 in Lagos, the same city where she was raised and educated before traveling to England to study accounting, Atta is a product of a mixed marriage and, comes from an influential family. Her father, a Muslim from the North, was the head of the civil service in the Balewa regime, while her mother is a Yoruba Christian from the Southwest. In an interview with Walter Collins, Atta insists that, unlike many Nigerian writers who consider themselves Yoruba, Hausa, or Igbo, she does not identify with or privilege any particular ethnic affiliation in her writing because she feels Nigerian only (123). However, in the Conclusion, I will show that a few instances in her novel complicate her claim that her narration does not favor one ethnic group over another. Before becoming a writer, Atta was a chartered accountant. She studied for an additional degree in creative writing at Antioch University in Los Angeles. To a certain extent, Atta's experience studying in London is replicated in the character of Enitan in her maiden book. Atta's list of publications includes *Everything Good Will Come* (2004), *Lawless*, a collection of short stories published as *News from Home* (2010) in the United Kingdom and the United States of America, *Swallow* (2010), and *A Bit of Difference* (2013). The importance of Atta's first novel is highlighted by the PEN International David T.K. Wong Prize and Wole Soyinka Prize for Literature in Africa. In an interview with Elena Rodríguez Murphy, Atta admits that this recognition has contributed to her fame "as one of the leading writers" of the third generation from Nigeria (106).

The female figure is often underrepresented in popular Nigerian texts authored by men. These narratives, as Stephanie Newell observes, are in tune with a "non-unified but dominant

masculine ideology which constantly adapts its versions of male power to explain a changing society” (*West African Literatures* 186). Newell contends that events in the society are mostly represented from the views of men while women’s voices and contributions to literature are disregarded. This chapter is intent on explaining the often ignored perspectives of women on the social and political problems of the Nigerian nation-state by considering the experiences of women as citizens, daughters, wives, or sisters, as represented in *Everything Good Will Come*. While not entirely on gender conflict, my discussion examines how the novel, like *Graceland* and *Waiting for an Angel*, reflects the political reality and disappointment of the ordinary individual. In doing this, I argue that it engages with the history of Nigeria, and rewrites the events of 1971 to the 1990s, a time during which the country was under the control of the military, with a view to showing the decline that the protagonist attempts to stop. *Graceland* and *Waiting for an Angel* very well fictionalize those years, but Atta’s novel goes beyond just narrating a state collapse under military power; it calls attention to women’s plight in the country.

Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, the celebrated Nigerian feminist critic, notes that “the woman writer has two major responsibilities: first to tell about being a woman; secondly, to describe reality from a woman’s point of view, a woman’s perspective” (57). By defining this commitment, Ogundipe-Leslie posits that women should take up the responsibilities of speaking for themselves and challenging the status quo. As her novel suggests, Atta has fully embraced this challenge by writing as a woman and witness of the happenings in her country. Interestingly, the path *Everything* takes toward explaining the experiences of women is by writing about the years of military dictatorships and drawing attention to the incessant conflicts that mirror life in contemporary Nigeria.

Set in Lagos, *Everything* is the story of Enitan Taiwo's coming of age in a crisis-laden country and traditional environment ruled by patriarchy and malfunctioning government at the same time. Enitan struggles to have a voice in this male dominated space where, as she and her childhood friend Sheri Bakare, both eleven years old, learn from the outset that "Women are not presidents" because their "men won't stand for it" (30). Interestingly, *Everything* does not hinge dictatorship and culture on each other, but rather represents both as a burden on women, whereas men are overwhelmed only by the former. This chapter notes that despite the novel's revolt against patriarchy and tradition, its main characters respond differently to the gender roles and imbalances that stifle women's voices and strengths. This observation notwithstanding, I contend that the overall discourse of *Everything* challenges men's domination of public and private spaces. My discussion dwells largely on female identity, tradition, and the sociopolitical impasse in Nigeria. The first part of my analysis focuses on Enitan's physical and emotional growth, the second describes my theoretical framework, while the third describes the crystallization of Enitan's experiences and her reactions to the circumstances in her country and the dictates of the culture against which she protests. The novel is crucial to my entire study because it underscores the masculinization of literature, and challenges the reader to re-examine the role and image of the female figure in the Nigerian novel. Aside from providing gender balance to my work, *Everything* allows me to engage with stronger and more articulate women whose commentaries on the sense of disillusionment among Nigerians disavow representations of women in *Waiting for and Angel* and *Graceland* as passive, timid, and servile.

In addition to the novel's characterization of Nigeria as a political dystopia, it succeeds in piloting the discourse on gender inequality in Nigerian literature further than the heights attained by the texts of her female predecessors such as Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta. While

comparing the social predicament in *Waiting for an Angel* and *Graceland* to the one in *Everything*, the vital question to ask is: are the experiences and reactions of women to Nigeria's condition different from the men's? To answer this question, the reader must understand first that aside from passionately recounting the current sociopolitical problems in the country, this text also responds to the biased representations of Nigerian women in the works of male writers, especially those of the previous generations. Atta reacts to the portrayals of women as weak in *Things Fall Apart* (Achebe), as objects of men's desire in *Jagua Nana's Daughter*, *People of the City* (Ekwensi), and *The Concubine* (Amadi), to say the least. Also, her novel strongly suggests that while Nigerian male writers are used to gendering the political debacle in the country as men's burden, they consistently ignore the fact that women are also victims of the post-independence gloom that has been hanging over their homeland since independence. It is interesting to examine how Atta, as a woman and writer, connects the complexities of the Nigerian federation to patriarchal politics.

Since Enitan's and Sheri's identities shape and develop with the plot of the novel, it behooves me to pay a close attention to the growth of these individuals in order to properly contextualize my discussion. Enitan, the daughter of a lawyer, Sunny Taiwo, comes from a wealthy but dysfunctional home. The series of troubles in her family, namely the death of her younger brother, her mother's ostensible spirituality, and her parents' eventual divorce, define her character in a society whose practices she does not embrace. Her relationship with Sheri shapes her growth in the entire novel. Sheri comes from a polygamous family headed by Alhaji Bakare. Her mother is a white English woman, while her father is a Yoruba man. Sheri's father and mother were not married to each other, but they had her just after the father graduated from a school in England, where she was born. Claiming he wanted his daughter to learn about his



tradition, Sheri's father withdrew her from England, and handed her over to his mother and wives in Nigeria. In order to cover his past, he deceives his daughter that her mother is dead (171). The homes of the two characters symbolize Nigeria's social impairment in that in spite of its wealth, problems such as ethnic divisions and political disturbances overwhelmingly militate against the country. Through the conditions of individual characters, especially Enitan, Sheri, Enitan's mother, Arinola Victoria Taiwo, Enitan's father, Bandele Sunday Taiwo (a.k.a. Sunny), his client, Peter Mukoro, and Grace Ameh, a journalist/activist and later Enitan's partner in the struggle for women's rights, this text details a long stretch of social, cultural, and political conflicts.

Enitan does not enjoy a good childhood because she is constantly confused and torn between her parents whose turbulent relationship is largely defined by nagging, deceit, and unending disagreements over whom their daughter should obey. Her father wants his child to take after him, as her mother later suggests (93). Following the death of her three-year-old brother due to "sickle cell crises" (10), Enitan becomes the only child at home. Years pass by, and she glides toward "adolescence with an extraordinary number of body aches," completes her primary education, and longs for a promotion to secondary school. Whenever her parents are away from the house during this period, Enitan has time to pay attention to whatever happens in the compound. On the other days, she is not excited, but two weeks prior to her leaving for school she has an encounter that changes her life forever. Her mother prevents her from relating with the neighboring children. The girl that Enitan sees through "the wide gap in the fence" does not appear familiar to her, and "looked nothing like the Bakare children who lived next door," who "were dark as me; younger too" (13). The person she sees is indeed Sheri Bakare, a very chatty, rude, and rebellious girl in the protagonist's thinking (35). They develop a friendship with

each other from this point onward. Unlike Enitan, Sheri takes orders from no one. She is independent, and thinks for herself. Enitan is used to being told what she can and cannot do, and marvels why no one tells Sheri not to “wear high heels” and lipstick. Since her parents are not at home on Sundays, Enitan encourages Sheri to visit again next Sunday if she likes, an invitation she is obliged to honor (16).

At first, Sheri is Enitan’s interlocutor, a role that gives her an opportunity to influence the development of Enitan as a character. She helps the protagonist to discover her traits and sexuality in addition to shaping her awareness of the happenings around her. Enitan’s meeting with Sheri reminds her how people in her school behave and relate to the “other” individual, for a fair-skinned person like Sheri is “called ‘Yellow Pawpaw’ or ‘Yellow Banana,’” and “you were teased for being yellow or fat; for being Moslem or for being dumb; for stuttering or wearing a bra and for being Igbo, because it meant you were Biafran or knew people who were” (18). Not only is she aware of the abuse a “yellow,” fat, and bra wearing girl is subjected to in her school, but Enitan also begins to demonstrate her knowledge of ethnic differences in her surroundings. Sheri is more emotionally advanced than Enitan, and she teaches her friend different things, including how to decipher coded words that signify intimacy. Even though her mother can call kids like Sheri “*omo-ita*, street children” because of her character, Enitan is fond of her. The protagonist recognizes the impact her friendship with her has on her identity when she admits that “Sheri had led me to the gap between parental consent and disapproval. I would learn how to bridge it with deception, wearing a face as pious as a church sister before my mother and altering steadily behind her” (43). Enitan is a new person after befriending Sheri.

New experiences at Royal College expose Enitan to different people and many things, including culture, religion, and politics. In her new school, she finally understands why her Uncle Alex “had always said our country was not meant to be one” (44). She realizes that she is different from girls who come from the other ethnocultural groups, and she knows the traits that distinguish her from them. “Hausa girls,” she says, “had softer hair because of their Arab heritage. Yoruba girls like me usually had heart-shaped faces and many Igbo girls were fair-skinned; we called them Igbo Yellow.” Even though they all speak the same English, the country’s lingua franca, Enitan strengthens her awareness of the differences, remarking that “our native tongues were as different as French and Chinese” (45). While explaining the physical appearances of the Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo girls in her school, Enitan seizes the opportunity to describe Sheri as of mixed race. There are girls in her school who are like Sheri because they “had one parent from a foreign country. Half-castes we called them, without malice or implications. Half because they claimed both sides of their heritage. There was no caste system in our country” (45). Proving this claim is difficult, particularly because this novel does not represent all the cultures in Nigeria. Enitan clarifies here that calling Sheri half-caste does not imply racial abuse and discrimination. Enitan exchanging letters secretly with Sheri notwithstanding, she makes new friends in and outside her school. In spite of the malaria, untidiness of the dormitory, and other uncomfortable experiences in her boarding school, she prefers it to the trouble at home so much so that the scourge of corruption in her country does not bother her at all (46).

During her summer vacation at home, Enitan follows Sheri to a picnic with a group of boys, including Damola Ajayi, whom Enitan knows from a debating competition. Enitan likes Damola, but she fears Sheri’s carefree attitude with these boys could send the wrong signal that

her friend is licentious. This concern quickly turns out to be true when she is shocked to discover that the boys rape Sheri, with Damola “leaning against the door, in a daze” (62). Enitan covers up this secret, “the red bruises and scratches on her [Sheri’s] skin, her wrists, around her mouth, on her hips” and the smell “of cigarettes, alcohol, sweat” with her friend (63). She even helps her to bathe to clean up the mess left on her body by those who abused it. After the rape, Sheri realizes that she is pregnant, and she tries to abort the fetus, but she accidentally destroys her ability to bear children in the process. Enitan’s parents are aware of the rape and their daughter’s knowledge of it. For the first time, Sunny is so upset with his daughter that he hands her over to Arin for a punishment that includes “Three slaps” and returning to church with her mother after some years of absence (68). This incident is so shameful to Sheri that it fractures her relationship with Enitan, and affects her identity for the rest of the narrative. Enitan’s parents decide to send her to England to continue her studies, she loses contact with Sheri as a result, but her memory of the rape continues to shape her own identity and trust in men.

While studying abroad, Enitan joins a community of Nigerian students that “clung to each other, grappling with weather conditions and sharing news from home” (75). Unlike a few years earlier, Enitan begins to develop interest in the political instabilities in her native land. She is aware Nigeria has “had two military governments since the summer of 1975. The first ended with the assassination of our head of state; the second, in a transition to civilian rule. Still the news from home had not improved” (75). After graduating, she joins “a firm of solicitors in London,” and as a result she has more time to reflect on the crises in Nigeria (76). Following another coup, her disappointment in Nigeria begins to grow, and she complains that “we were children of the oil boom, and furthermore, we were children who had benefited from the oil boom,” but “Politics in our country was a scuffle between the military and politicians” (77). Two

failed relationships with Nigerian men in England also shape Enitan's responses to gender relations in her Yoruba culture.

Enitan spends nine years altogether abroad, visiting home only on holidays. During this period, her parents opt for a divorce because they can no longer sustain their complicated relationship. She sides with her father, and believes his version of the story of the crisis between him and her mother. After she returns home, Enitan visits her mother, who now lives alone in a separate house. Enitan's mother accuses her of being insensitive like Sunny, telling her "I may not have paid your school fees, but remember I gave birth to you. Just remember that, while you're out there walking around with certificate, calling yourself a lawyer. Someone gave birth to you" (94). The relationship between the two women is stormy for most part of the narrative. Enitan also reunites with Sheri, but this time not in the neighborhood. Both friends accept each other, now that Enitan admits learning through her friend, Robin, in England that "nothing a woman does justifies rape" (74).

Refreshing their friendship as adults who have learnt more about men and themselves, Enitan and Sheri discuss politics in the country, including men and culture. Sheri has become a concubine to Brigadier Hassan, a man who already has two wives at home (157). Enitan marries Niyi Franco, "a divorced Catholic" from a Brazilian family (180). In spite of her marriage, Enitan admits that Sheri is more traditional and ideal for the Yoruba culture that expects women to cook, do domestic chores, and, most importantly, have children. Aside from witnessing her male-controlled society scrutinize Sheri for all kinds of reasons, Enitan sees more aspects of her natal culture even as she faces problems in her own marriage. Following the arrest of her father by the military government, Enitan engages in political activism at the expense of her marriage.

At this point, she meets Grace Ameh, a journalist and activist who eventually encourages her to speak out against the government and the incarceration of her father by the Abacha regime. Niyi is not happy with his wife taking this risk, insisting that it is dangerous to her pregnancy and their marriage. Enitan defies his warning, and ask for her father's freedom. Niyi ignores her with silence, but she and Grace continue to meet with other women, speaking against the unfair detention of ordinary Nigerians by soldiers. Both women are treated as dissidents, and made to taste life in the prison for a short, but agonizing, time by the government.

Enitan struggles to understand patriarchal control in her culture. She recalls that her parents were born and raised in polygamous families, and that men of her father's generation commonly have children out of wedlock. She is disillusioned now that she discovers that her father, the only man she hitherto thought was different, had a male child, Debayo, two years after the death of her brother (151). This revelation compels her to mend her relationship with her mother. Enitan's discovery of Sunny's hypocrisy provides her with the opportunity to reflect on and understand her mother's true intention. She realizes that her father's insensitivity is part of the reason her mother is angry and acts the way she does, including her insistence on not having another child after Enitan. Sunny's family pressured him to have a son, but Arin charges that he gave no attention to the child and his wife, leaving the house "all the time, as if my son didn't exist, as if I didn't exist" (173). This revelation leads Enitan to understand and legitimize her mother's choice and to conclude that there is no "mother in the world who wouldn't believe that faith can heal her child after medicine has failed, even the young women of today, who are so smart about family planning" (174). Although Enitan meets her half-brother, and reconciles with her father after his release from the prison, she develops more antipathy toward men. Close to the end of the novel, she gives birth to a girl, and christens her Yimika—not that the name has any

significant meaning to her, except it is a deviation from the tradition of naming a female child Yetunde, that is, mother has reincarnated—but the conflict between her and Niyi proves unending. Feeling the pressure of acceding to the demands of culture and conforming to tradition all the time, Enitan breaks away from her husband to continue her political activism and fight for the women in her home country.

Importantly, the central discourse of *Everything* transcends the coming of age of two young women and their dysfunctional relationships with men. Through this narrative, Atta suggests that the contemporary Nigerian novel has the presence of the articulate woman writer. Therefore, writing about women's experiences is a fascinating dimension of the third generation fiction. Atta seizes on this platform not only to condemn the portrayal of women in the texts written by men, but to also re-narrate the roles of women in the struggles over Nigeria. Through her main characters, Enitan, Sheri, and Grace, Atta engages in a serious dialogue with patriarchy over the traditional practices limiting the sociopolitical privileges of women in her country. She represents her main characters as modern women who are poised to depart from the past in spite of the stiff opposition they encounter from the status quo. All the individuals in this novel are entangled in the social fiasco that derails their country. On the one hand, while some of the female characters participate in dangerous and life-threatening political agitations in the country, the male characters, with the exception of Sunny and his client Peter Mukoro, refuse to challenge the military because they are scared. On the other hand, whereas men constitute the majority of the human rights and political activists in *Waiting for an Angel* and *Graceland*, Atta complicates the image of women in these texts as unfit and too weak to champion dangerous political struggles and revolutionary consciousness against a power-drunk military regime.

In *Waiting for an Angel*, prostitution is the option Hagar prefers in spite of Joshua's plea to her to live differently, and Kela's mother, like his Auntie Rachel, is scared of violence while the men are agitators and fighters against military oppression. In *Graceland*, Florence runs away instead of fighting the police with her husband when their house in Maroko is demolished. The presence of women in these two novels is confined to the domestic space, but the women in *Everything* refuse to be restricted to the private sphere. Instead, they struggle to navigate the social and political systems that have so far been dominated by men, bringing their exploits to bear on the fact that the idea of the modern and elite woman is also a postcolonial reality that has grown stronger in the contemporary novel since the publication of *Efuru* by Flora Nwapa. As this notion forms part of the narrative of third generation literary productions from Nigeria, it is important that I articulate it through postcolonial feminism before I engage in further discussion of *Everything*.

### **DEFINING POSTCOLONIAL FEMINISM**

As a corollary to the foregoing discussion, Atta's ideology in *Everything* is that of a woman speaking from the ambivalent space of postcolonial feminism. For her, feminism is a state of consciousness. The experiences of the novel's main characters are indicative of Atta's knowledge of gender imbalance in her country. Reading *Everything* as a feminist text is challenging. In fact, defining the term "feminism" in a general sense has been very tough. For example, the African-American feminist critic bell hooks describes it as "a movement to end sexist oppression" (33). hooks' broad argument is predicated on the fact that feminism discourages sexual discrimination against men and women irrespective of who practices it. However, Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí, a contemporary Nigerian feminist critic, argues that feminism, as a movement against the unequal treatment of women by men, "is primarily concerned with the



liberation of women” (“Introduction” 2). Implied here is the idea that feminism is a social movement whose focus is driven by women’s crusade to liberate themselves from patriarchy. Oyěwùmi contends that this notion is deeply rooted in the political agitation of women for equality in Europe and North America (1-2). But she questions the understanding and consideration of African women’s condition through Western feminism, which she claims “is entangled with the history and practice of European and North American imperialism and the worldwide European colonization of Africa, Asia, and the Americas.” She adds that such history of imperialism is “a metascript of domination and oppression, revealing itself variously in the realms of culture, nationality, race, ethnicity, gender, and class” (3). Ultimately, her argument is that Western views of feminism cannot sufficiently represent the African woman because first, “the category *woman* in Africa cannot be isolated,” which “raises the question of the relevance and value of Western feminism” (2). Second, “the local situations that are themselves in a state of flux” influence the nature and agenda of women’s agitation in the African setting. These differences between Western and African feminisms notwithstanding, Oyěwùmi notes that feminism is increasingly the most efficient “manufacturer of gender consciousness and gender categories” (2). Her discussion applies to Nigeria as well. In *Everything*, therefore, feminism creates awareness about gender disparity and the struggles to end the practices and processes that subordinate women in the country.

The circumstances that drive women’s agitation for better treatment in Nigeria are not entirely synonymous with the struggle of women in America, for example. In her sustained effort to identify feminism as women’s vehicle for social change, Carol Boyce Davies contends that “African feminism looks at traditional and contemporary avenues of choice for women” (10). The binary embedded in this argument does little to clarify the confusion over the most effective

avenues from which women should derive power to tackle gender imbalance. Instead, it reinforces the ambivalent status of postcolonial feminism. Foregrounding his awareness of this binary, the influential Ghanaian scholar Ato Quayson acknowledges that women all over the world face similar challenges. He, however, argues that the problems of women in African/Third World countries, Nigeria included, are exacerbated by the sociopolitical and economic realities that collude with patriarchal hostilities that subjugate women under men's control. He observes that the "conundrum that afflicts women's lives is arguably greatly aggravated in the Third World, where women's existence is strung between traditionalism and modernity in ways that make it difficult for them to attain personal freedom without severe sacrifices and compromises" (585). This remark implies that the elite African woman/feminist inevitably finds herself caught between two different worlds with diverse cultural practices during her pursuit of happiness, freedom, and gender equality. Divided against each other, these two worlds construct the postcolonial feminist as an ambivalent figure, albeit one in which she is poised to gain self-determination.

More so, the postcolonial feminist is torn between the oppressive tradition and her desire to articulate freedom. In her doctoral dissertation titled "'Is There Nowhere Else We Can Meet?' The Post-colonial Woman Writer and Political Fiction," Joya Farooq Uraizee provides an interesting argument when she notes that "the post-colonial woman is an ambivalent figure because her position in society is constantly displaced, her voice is always resisting imperial or patriarchal hegemony and her discourse constantly evolves and shifts. She is at once elite and powerless, at once subversive and exploitative" (viii). The postcolonial feminist/woman is situated between two opposing paradigms that enhance her status as an ambiguous voice. The case against this view is that it accords classism to postcolonial feminism because Uraizee

defines the postcolonial woman as part of the elite since she has the wherewithal to challenge patriarchy in her environment. If, as Heidi Safia Mirza argues, “the scholarship of [. . .] postcolonial feminists is located in the political, social and economic terrain of [. . .] contemporary postcolonial nation states” (2), then postcolonial feminism privileges the elite woman that can afford to confront patriarchal power over the ones who lack the social, material, and intellectual resources to do so. The reason the premises of this argument should not be interpreted negatively rests on the fact that elite women draw attention to the unequal power relations between the masculinized establishments of their countries and the oppressed female figure. Their struggle will be far from being recognized should they have no discernible intellectual prowess. On this point, Mirza contends that the fundamental preoccupations of postcolonial feminists include “everyday national and transnational transformative struggles of resistance against poverty, religion, patriarchy and class” (2). However contentious postcolonial feminist writing may seem, it represents a daily struggle that involves a revolt against patriarchy on behalf of women, including those that lack the resources to speak out against female subjugation.

In spite of the cogent arguments provided by postcolonial feminist critics like Mirza, it is not possible to measure postcolonial feminism on a universal scale. In fact, Chandra Mohanty is critical of the universalization of women’s experiences based on the sameness of gender, that is, simply because they are women, and challenges the common assumption that women exist “as an already constituted, coherent group with identical interests and desires, regardless of class, ethnic or racial location or contradictions” (336-37). She insists that women’s conditions should be contextualized or situated within a specific location, and studied based on their circumstances in that location. In this regard, feminist discourse can be flexible and address women’s

challenges in their respective places/locations more accurately. For instance, the political realities in Malaysia, India, and Canada are different from the ones in Nigeria, Ghana, and Jamaica. Therefore, postcolonial feminists in each of these countries shape their struggles in relation to the realities in their regions. It is important to admit, however, that postcolonial feminism generally excavates “the silences and pathological appearances of a collectivity of women assigned as the ‘other’ as she is produced in a gendered, sexualised [. . .] discourse,” and thus it is a “political project” that positions itself against the unfair representation of women by the existing paradigms of gender power established by masculinity (Mirza 3). The efficacy of this “political project” is undeniable, but its *modus operandi* differs from one location to another. If, as Mohanty suggests, the configuration of feminism by critics should vary from place to place, the same is true of Nigeria and Africa. As previously noted in my discussion of postcolonial literary theory, experiences in Africa are not homogenous. Thus, the circumstances of Nigerian women do not necessarily represent the challenges of the rest of the women on the continent.

To support this claim, Oyěwùmi asserts in a separate discussion that an African feminist discourse “is unwarranted homogenization.” In her writing on gender constructs in Yoruba society, she contends that although “Africans have many things in common and that some generalizations are possible,” gender relations in Yoruba culture, “both historically and today cannot be taken for granted to the same degree in all places, institutions, and situations.” Anything contrary to this observation, according to Oyěwùmi, amounts to “facile generalizations” or “a simplistic general case about Africa from the Yoruba example” (*Invention* xiv). Oyěwùmi proposes that the local culture plays a huge role in gender discourses and conflicts. By complicating the notion of African feminism, she suggests that even in Nigeria, the

subject/concept (of woman), which Ogundipe-Leslie considers complex, influences women differently, hence Nigerian feminist dimensions.

Culture, class, and historical practices influence women's perception of the issues that matter to feminism, a term which Ogundipe-Leslie sometimes replaces with "womanhood" because of its complexities in Nigeria. She cites an instance of the traditional practice of "women who marry wives in Igboland and lord it over the husbands of their acquired wives and women who are called 'men' when they attain certain levels of economic and social independence" (61). Among a Yoruba group of women, the story is different. She recalls that during "a symposium organized by the Nigerian Association of University Women in 1974, with market-women of the city of Ibadan on the panel, the trading women revealed interest in problems patently different from our middle-class ones" (74). The market-women "were [. . .] contemptuous of some of these problems, in particular, the resentment of polygyny by middle-class and Westernized women." The majority of them "felt men could not be expected to be loyal to one woman." Some of the women even said that "they need[ed] helpmates in the form of co-wives to assist with house-work. They needed younger wives to share, or preferably take over, the chores of kitchen and bed, so they, the older wives, could [. . .] concentrate on travel for business reasons" (74). These findings show the beliefs and customs that complicate a unified feminist consciousness in Nigeria, as my analysis of *Everything* will demonstrate. My thesis is that whatever perspective the Nigerian woman legitimizes, the foregoing discussion indicates that there is a need for women to pursue liberation from patriarchal oppression in the country. Atta merges this reality with the political situation in Nigeria to describe in her novel the country's decline.

### NAVIGATING THE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SPACES IN *EVERYTHING*

Clearly, the foregoing argument is relevant to third generation women's writing from Nigeria. In *Everything*, postcolonial feminism is depicted as a form of political agitation aimed at drawing attention to the conditions of the women oppressed by patriarchy. Atta represents the experiences of a vastly gendered and sexualized Enitan and Sheri, whose struggle to be free and survive in a patriarchal and dysfunctional society is met with pain, stern opposition, and frustration.

Essentially, the author depicts the challenges of Nigerian women through the lens of the elite and educated women in Enitan, Sheri, and the journalist activist Grace.

In addition to expressing women's quest for freedom in a country that is riddled with socioeconomic inequities, *Everything* questions the patriarchal control of both the domestic and public spaces. The text suggests that Nigerian women dwell under a double yoke of oppression since the tyranny of the state is also reflected at home. Enitan constantly explores this particular theme in the novel, especially in her representation of the relationship between men and women, and the advantages the former derive from the culture that is associated with Yoruba, the protagonist's ethnocultural group. At one point, the two-fold oppression women suffer in their traditional community and volatile country compels Enitan to lament that "it was one thing to face an African community and tell them how to treat a woman like a person. It was entirely another to face an African dictatorship and tell them how to treat people like citizens" (283). Even though she sees similar elements in an African dictatorship in this context, Nigeria is her focal point. The circumstances that influence her remark are associated with the patriarchal practices that inhibit women who dare to express themselves at home and in the country at large.

Meanwhile, the few men controlling the politics are not victims of the country's dictatorship, since they occupy the corridors of power that are conspicuously devoid of women.

Also, women are expected to remain silent and lower their heads in the face of the country's fiasco because it is only men that supposedly are capable of revolting against the dictatorial government, as we have already seen in *Graceland* and *Waiting for Angel*. After all, according to the culture Enitan inherits and marries into, "men fight for land, and women fight for family" (295). In this sense, women's struggle for the family does not involve physical tussles, but rather implies that they must make every sacrifice possible in order to stay married to their husbands and remain with their children just as Sunny threatened to marry another wife should Arin refuse to have a son for him (173). Professing to be a women's rights sympathizer later in the novel, he claims that "women are not vocal enough" (258). This man is guilty of hypocritical attitudes because of the manner in which he treats his wife. His behavior contradicts the timeless English saying that "charity begins at home."

Even though he inspires his daughter to engage in political activism on behalf of the oppressed and to beat up anyone who bullies her at school, Sunny is a feminist only outside his own home (39). The irony of his disposition toward women's conditions is exposed by the evidence that he never encourages his wife to speak out against the way he treats and cheats on her with an unknown woman after the death of their son. Also, he encourages his daughter not to spend time in the kitchen because, according to him, "young girls don't do this anymore." He specifically advises her to "join the debating society, not the girl guides. Girl guides are nothing but kitchen martyrs in the making," he says (40). It is no surprise, then, that Enitan models her activism after her father's throughout the novel. She spends most of her childhood absorbing the notion that her mother is mean, negative, too confrontational, sad, and selfish. From the beginning, she fails to develop a relationship with her mother, admitting that "to hear my mother shout from her kitchen window: 'Enitan, come and help in here'" is her worst moment (7). She

believes whatever her father tells her, and in siding with him all the time, she distances herself from her mother, whose footsteps, she says, “made me breathe faster” (19). She concludes that people like Arin “had to be unhappy or strict, or a mixture of both,” adding that her mother “and her church friends, their priest with his expression as if he was sniffing something bad” never look happy. None of them has “a friendly face, and even in our old Anglican church people had generally looked miserable as they prayed” (19).

Also, Sunny’s feminist cause does not involve his wife. When he boasts that “he’s for the liberation of women,” Arin quickly responds “except your wife” because “you never ask me not to” cook (21). While men like Sunny campaign against the bad government, their behavior toward women at home leaves a huge question mark on the legitimacy and genuineness of their activism, especially the aspect that relates to women’s rights. He fails to understand that his wife seeks a quick escape from her trauma through religion (174). After the death of their son, Sunny looks for another male child outside his marriage in the name of tradition. No one knows what becomes of his concubine whose role in the narrative is just to have a son. He does not marry or identify with her afterwards even after divorcing Arin. This attitude calls into question Sunny’s sincerity and respect for women’s dignity.

As an adult, Enitan dares to question her father’s hypocrisy. Even though she is a lawyer, she feels that she is constrained and marginalized by her culture and the political debilities of the country. For this reason, she frowns at the limited freedom women have despite their education, as she reveals during one of her heated conversations with her father:

Show me one case. [. . .] Just one case of a woman having two husbands, a fifty-year-old woman marrying a twelve-year-old boy. We have women judges,



and a woman can't legally post bail. I am a lawyer. If I were married, I would need my husband's consent to get a new passport. He would be entitled to discipline me with a slap or two, so long as he doesn't cause me a grievous bodily harm. (140)

Two positions are implicit in Enitan's complaint here. First, she casts aspersions on men's double standard on morality, which in fact only serves to feed their selfishness, chauvinism, and moral laxity. This is because while women are forbidden from indulging in bigamy, men regard polygamy as a right they can choose to exercise depending on their preferences. For Enitan, this double standard secretly practised by her father and allegedly involved in by Peter Mukoro, stems from nothing different from what Quayson terms "the hypocritical patriarchal attitudes of men" (585). Like Sunny, Mukoro claims he is a social critic until his hypocrisy is exposed by his wife of twenty two years, Clara, to a magazine called *Weekend People*.

In her interview with the gossip magazine, Clara shares "the story of how Peter Mukoro came home with a bald patch in his public hair. His lover had helped herself to a sample while he was asleep. The proceeds went to a medicine man to brew a portion to ensnare him" (138-39). Enitan jumps on this story, accusing Mukoro, a self-proclaimed "social crusader practising bigamy," of dishonesty. Sunny has a different view, and insists that Clara "disgraced herself," adding that she has "nothing better to do, going to the press with this nonsense" because this is "a private matter" (139). In the face of her father's loyalty to his friend and client, Enitan insists that this revelation disavows all that Mukoro professes to represent. These men secretly embrace the acts they condemn openly, while women are generally the victims of their hypocrisy. Because she rejects this double standard, Enitan appreciates the magazine for considering Mukoro's story newsworthy so that people can know his true character.

Second, Enitan rages against the overdependence her culture and the “native law and custom” in the country force women to have on men (140). She contends that the native law, invented by men, “has no moral grounding, no design except to oppress women” (139). There are a few instances in the novel that evidence her assertion. Her mother complains that Sunny makes people believe he is a human rights activist, but he keeps ignoring her rights, especially by refusing to put her houses in her name (92). After their divorce, Arin continues to live in the property that is in Sunny’s name. This is an indication that she relies on her ex-husband for shelter. In her description of “those indigenous set[s] of codes collectively called native law and custom” that “existed before we adopted civil law, before we became a nation with a constitution, and they established individual rights under inheritance and marriage,” Enitan reveals that a woman gets nothing when her husband dies because “his son would inherit his estate instead of his widow” (137). The native law deprives a woman of ownership of properties since everything is in the husband’s name.

Not surprisingly, after the death of her father, Sheri’s uncle takes over the properties left by Alhaji Bakare, claiming they are his inheritance according to custom. When he threatens to seize the remaining house from Sheri, her siblings, and her father’s wives for “misusing his property” that is in Sheri’s father’s name, she asks Enitan for advice (137). Enitan encourages her “to find a good lawyer.” The latter wonders if she can ask Enitan’s father since he “is a good lawyer.” Within herself, the protagonist contemplates that “I am not sure I wanted her to ask my father about anything, especially as he had not settled the matter with my mother” (138). Here, we notice the extent to which the indigenous culture forces women to depend on men and live with nothing in the event that a man dies or divorces his wife. Enitan is aware that her father

exploits this custom to ignore his ex-wife's demands, hence asking him to help Sheri will further expose his hypocrisy.

Again, Ogundipe-Leslie reflects on the impact of this culture in her discussion of "the humanity, the *personhood* of the Nigerian woman." She argues that the Nigerian woman "is often an appendage to someone else—a man—because most of our cultures are patrilineal and patriarchal," the reason for which the Nigerian woman is "not a person in herself with, individual fundamental rights, claimable by herself and without reference to anybody else" (140).

Ogundipe-Leslie highlights Enitan's complaint that the native custom deprives women of independence and the right to own assets. With his considerable education, Sunny is an accomplice of the law that bars women from owning real estate. Due to this gender inequality, throughout the novel Enitan vigorously challenges the discriminatory practices this native law encourages against women.

In addition to the unfairness she identifies in the law, Enitan is at odds with the social order in the country, especially the Yoruba culture that expects women to fulfil domestic obligations like cooking and taking care of the house, in addition to having children. Prior to the above encounter with her father, Enitan challenges the thinking of Sheri on the expectations of her culture from women because she considers these demands unfair, forcing her to think that "coming home to Nigeria was like moving back to the fifties in England" (102). In turn, Sheri vehemently disagrees with Enitan about doing the household chores that are popularly regarded as the traditional duties of women in the native culture. Even though she encourages women to stand for themselves in the face of domestic violence as she does when she beats up Hassan, her military lover, "for every person who had crossed her path in life," using "a pot of okra soup," Sheri insists that cooking for your husband or the family is no form of oppression (170). Aware

of her own condition not to be able to have children, she admonishes Enitan that it is more acceptable “to be crippled, to be a thief even, than to be barren” because both of them “had been raised to believe that our greatest days would be: the birth of our first child” (102). In spite of her circumstance, Sheri carries herself with pride, and she pays homage to her culture. Always speaking to Enitan as if she were her own younger sister, she advises her against a potentially troubled marriage in the future, suggesting that “Education cannot change what’s inside a person’s veins. Scream and shout, if you like, bang your head against the wall, you will end up in the kitchen. Period” (104). Sheri emphatically acknowledges her idea that the kitchen is the woman’s space according to her culture, and she expresses her intolerance of domestic violence on her own body, insisting that she differs from a lot of women because “if you lift your hand to beat me, I will kill you. God no go vex” (104). She is fully aware that domestic violence is one of the social crises the women of her country experience frequently.

Without a doubt, Enitan and Sheri disagree on culture and tradition, despite the fact that they are both contemporary women. Enitan, from whose perspective *Everything* is narrated, highlights the difference between her position and Sheri’s understanding of how their native culture should operate when she secretly denounces the latter’s advice, remarking that “Sheri was the Nigerian man’s ideal: pretty, shapely, yellow to boot, with some regard for a woman’s station. Now she was a kitchen martyr, and may well have forgotten how to flaunt her mind” (105). From Sheri’s perspective, Enitan is a “spoiled rotten” (15) and “butter-eater” (103) individual whose head is filled with “nonsense” (104). Whereas both women demonstrate their awareness of the gender biases in their society, there is no meeting point in their perception of their natal culture, especially regarding the expectation that women must do domestic chores. In

contrast to her friend's position, Sheri understands cooking as a woman's household responsibility, and having children a coveted blessing.

On the subject of womanhood, the perception of Arin is equally influential. On the one hand, she does not stand in complete opposition to the demands of tradition, although she no longer trusts men after her failed marriage. She scolds her daughter over a confrontation with her father, warning her that it "is taboo, to call your father a liar." On the other hand, she cautions Enitan never to "make sacrifices for a man" because, to her, men are insensitive and ungrateful (173). Arin's remarks are informed by her own experience as Sunny's ex-wife and a betrayed woman. What is more, Enitan sarcastically remarks that her country's "women are praised the more they surrender their right to protest," but she learns in the end that there are more painful sacrifices that women must pay for freedom and happiness (179). Her mother-in-law, Toro Franco, understands this reality, but not as a problem or oppression, as she attempts to encourage harmony between Enitan and Niyi with a piece of advice that is replete with contradictions: Enitan must "learn that a woman makes sacrifices in life. It shouldn't take anything out of you to indulge your husband for the sake of peace in your house" (302). Enitan does not express any objection to this suggestion that obviously gives more power to men and further subjugates women, but it does not bring closure to her revolt against tradition. In the end, her marriage falls apart because its demands hamper her position that women should be free from the overwhelming control of the masculine power occupying the private and public spheres.

Regardless of the disagreements among Nigerian feminist writers, they seem generally more interested in demonstrating the idea that feminism "has been about challenging the representations of women and arguing for better conditions for them." Granted that this is the case, it is then legitimate to conclude that the primary goal of feminist discourse in the third

generation Nigerian fiction is to facilitate women's freedom from cultural, economic, social, and political constraints. Instead of unfairly inhibiting women and muting their voices, feminist literary critics believe that political representation must be balanced, or else "it has to be constantly reviewed by those it claims to serve" (Quayson 586). It is important that women participate in making the decisions that shape their lives every day. This is the idea that Enitan legitimizes. Democracy is not a term the Nigerian military tolerates. Since the entire country is militarized, both men and women live under the bogs of political oppression and draconianism. While the quests for freedom, genuine democracy, human rights, and civil liberties are promoted by men like Sunny, women are silenced, disrespected, and disregarded. After noticing the injustices of the oppressive practices of the army, Enitan participates in a political struggle against the government, but men like Niyi opt for silence and inaction, preferring to mind their own businesses instead. She goes as far as asking for her father's release through the *Oracle*, a weekly magazine for which Grace writes (240). Invited by Grace, she attends a reading where speakers comment on their experiences as Nigerians and the circumstances that overwhelm the country (262-63).

Moreover, by engaging in political action at the expense of her marriage and pregnancy, Enitan demonstrates to the reader that not only do Nigerian women care about combating the country's problems, but they also share the convoluted nationalist consciousness that has so far been identified with men in ways which "rendered women completely alienated and absent from the experiences that were being declaimed on their behalf" (Quayson 587). Quayson challenges the claims of the nationalist movement to protect the interest of everyone, including women, who have been witnessing and reading the definition of nationalism in relation to men's experiences only. Enitan's risky political action is informed by her knowledge of how much the struggle

against the political situation in Nigeria has been gendered to the advantage of men. She intends to prove her strength as a woman feeling the effects of military despotism, and she also demonstrates her awareness of the journey the country has made from independence to this time. Reflecting on the stagnation of the federation, Enitan recalls that she grew up witnessing the rapid and violent deterioration of her country (330). For her, the transition the country has made from independence to her days as an adult woman has done nothing to consolidate the struggle for political sovereignty. She feels that post-independence Nigeria has been a period of disenchantment and chaos “linked to corrupt or lustful government officials” (249). Rather than enjoy freedom in every facet of their country, Enitan believes that her fellow citizens deal with poverty, violence, dictatorship, and all other forms of political shambles every day.

It must be noted that Enitan is different from Lomba and Elvis Oke in the sense that she is born into a more privileged home. She does not live in a Maroko slum or on Poverty Street. Yet, aside from being educated overseas, Enitan experiences the troubles in her country like these men do. She discusses these problems, and confronts them as a woman. For her, the country and the women in it deserve to have a voice that speaks for them. She finds solace in Grace’s demonstration of this consciousness. According to Grace, military officers can arrest, detain and “fire bomb” her office, but they “can’t kill a testimony of a country and of a people. That is what we’re fighting for, a chance to be heard. And the second thing is, I love my country” (298). Like the previous texts, there is no direct encounter with Nigerian military/political leaders as characters in this novel. Unlike *Graceland* and *Waiting for an Angel*, military actions, except for the series of arrests made, are more remote in *Everything*. Nevertheless, Enitan and Grace sustain their effort to draw attention to the broken promises in their country. Both women understand why they have to use their “voice to bring about change” rather than mute it as an

obligation to family duties. Grace, in particular, realizes that the less-privileged “in this country” have little or no chance to express themselves and effect any desirable changes because they are “born into poverty, [have been] hungry from childhood, [and have] no formal education” (258). In contrast, the privileged ones choose to engage in no action against the despotic government of the country inasmuch as they can secure their means of livelihood without inhibition.

Enitan proves this claim when she feels bothered by the silence of the privileged people, precisely the ones living in her neighborhood, Sunrise, despite the mismanagement of power by military regimes that are hell-bent on destroying the hope of survival every citizen of the country still nurtures. “How did we live comfortably under a dictatorship?,” she asks, before quickly providing a clue: “The truth was that, we in places like Sunrise, if we never spoke out, were free as we could possibly be, complaining about our rubbish rotten country, and crazy armed robbers, and inflation” (231). Surprisingly, those who are well-to-do and the country’s authoritarian government carve a different image of the masses protesting against military cruelties. The common people are wretched and destitute; they struggle with poor living conditions. Their daily existence is strewn between hopelessness and sadism. Yet, Enitan’s wealthy neighbors have no concern for the plight of these people whom they see regularly. This attitude irritates the protagonist, especially when she recalls the faces of her “father, backdoor house boys and house girls, child hawkers, beggars” whose pains elicit no sympathy from the people that feel comfortable about Nigeria’s situation. The languid attitude of the privileged people toward the condition of the country is troubling since, according to Enitan, “there was a feeling that if people were at a disadvantage, it was because they somehow deserved it. They were poor, illiterate, they were radical, subversive, and they were not us” (231). Unknown to the people whose behaviour Enitan complains about, they are also oppressed in a country that has no regard



for its citizens because, one way or the other, everyone is mistreated by the authoritarian government.

Enitan takes exception to the rule of silence by deciding to speak out against the military and attending the reading because she wants “to be around people who had taken a stand against our government” (260). Her father is one of the privileged few that criticize the military regime that is apparently led by General Sani Abacha since the narrator makes reference to 1995. His activism, in comparison to Niyi’s indifference to the crises, including “a petrol shortage” (244), in his country makes Enitan wonder if people like her father “come from a different place” or are “born that way,” prepared “to fight, tough enough to be imprisoned” (238). To Enitan, her father is a hero because he is not afraid to criticize the military. In solidarity with Peter Mukoro, he publicizes discourse on postcolonial Nigeria as a political dystopia when he calls on the military regime, through the magazine, to step down from power for turning the country into a prison stuffed with the common people (192). Sunny primarily engages in this action with a view to mounting pressure on the government to release from detention his friend and “long time client,” who, being the editor of *The Oracle*, gets into trouble because he “had gained a wide readership because of the kind of reports he pursued: exposes on drug rings, oil spills in the Niger Delta, cults and gangs in universities, religious wars in the north, Nigerian prostitution rings in Italy” (191), but Enitan is the one who capitalizes on her father’s activism in order to reinforce the notion that Nigeria is synonymous with anarchy.

Unfortunately, the government responds to pro-democracy rallies and the people’s demands “by breaking up meetings, detaining students, lawyers, union leaders, ex-politicians, journalists, any individuals they [the military] considered enemies of the state” (191). Aside from the military gunning “down protesters during political unrest,” Enitan reveals that “there were

thousands of other ways people were being killed in my country.” People die of diseases, poor road conditions, poverty, lack of healthcare, and so on, according to her (192). Her disappointment is a testament to the circumstances that frustrate the ordinary people in the novel on a daily basis. By feeling this way, she confirms the conditions that *Graceland* and *Waiting for an Angel* describe, precisely in Maroko and on Poverty Street respectively.

Additionally, *Everything* does not regard the military dictatorship as the only guilty party in the derailment of post-independence Nigeria. The novel also implicates civilian politicians in the failure of the country. Enitan accuses the civilian government of instituting “a more debauched democracy” that is characterised by “champagne parties, embezzlements,” ineptitude, and ethnic strife. At the same time, she complains that the military violently seize power from civilians “in a country where you still couldn’t expect electricity for a full week” (78). Instead of sympathizing with the politicians overthrown by the soldiers, Enitan admits that they are equally mean because “they don’t care about democracy. They never have, only about power. My memory of them, throwing cash to villagers, rigging elections, setting opposition groups on fire, making themselves richer” (296). These corrupt actions of the post-independence civilian government are the excuses with which the military justify their often disastrous coups. This text does not appear concerned with juxtaposing the military and the civilian leaders, but the narrator portrays the army officers in power as worse than the civilian government in some areas. The moment they take over, the military officers suspend the country’s constitution that Enitan’s father regards as the document to which the people grant power to represent them and protect their rights as citizens (78). Rather than responsibly control civil disorder, the military disregard the constitution, and institute decrees, thereby creating avenues for indiscipline so that they can maltreat the ordinary people (192).

Indeed, it is fascinating how Atta encourages a discussion of the roles of women in the fights against military regimes in Nigeria. However, the two female characters whose activism stands out in the novel are Enitan and Grace, who, unlike Sheri, says she is “not interested in who held the power in our country, military or the politicians” even though “she had witnessed their corruption first hand,” and “mixed with the underworld who got rich on their backs” (249). Despite this claim, Sheri joins Grace to help Enitan understand the different aspects of her country and tradition. These women experience and represent the postcolonial condition of Nigeria differently from men. Niyi, as well as Joe, Grace’s husband, is an example of the men that choose to ignore the oppressive military governments. Instead of supporting their wives in the risky quest to “save” Nigeria, these men prefer to fully concentrate on their families and ensure their own safety. In their thinking, it is suicidal to push oneself into trouble with the military. The attitudes of the men are surprising to Enitan. Both men are scared by the amount of violence perpetrated by the military and their accomplices. Their protestation over the inhumane acts of the military in the country troubles the popular image of the male figures as brave, daring, and strong in the texts written by men. This claim does not discount the fact that Sunny Taiwo and Peter Mukoro are arrested for criticizing unfair government practices, but the rest of the men in this novel, except the ones at the reading, are the exact opposite of the “courageous” male characters in *Waiting for an Angel* and *Graceland*.

While Atta acknowledges that men and women are victims of the social, economic, and political plagues afflicting her country, her text effectively writes women into the protest against military dictatorships, giving them the voice, power, and recognition they are denied in the texts that men have written on the attitudes of the government and the troubles of the ordinary people in Nigeria (see Akung 115). Women like Grace and Enitan are not held back by the grave

consequences their actions invite from the government. Aside from their temporary loss of freedom, the women also experience starvation and harsh condition in detention (267-76). Yet, they are determined to continue speaking out against the dystopia that is Nigeria.

In addition, there is no denying that Enitan questions patriarchy throughout the novel, and defines herself as the new, modern, elite, and urban woman. During her transition from childhood to adulthood, she refuses to give up her position on the ways her culture should treat women. Through this character, Atta demonstrates her interest in critiquing the social disadvantages created by despotic and, more importantly, patriarchal politics in her homeland. Unlike most of the women she claims to speak for, Enitan has greater advantages. She is educated in England, home of the former colonizers. She has a sound legal education and wields economic power over a large number of Nigerian women. Accordingly, the validity of her agitation for better treatment of women by men is subject to scrutiny.

Certainly, it is not all the female characters in the novel that have formal education or enjoy economic advantages. We do not hear anything substantial from the less privileged women because most of the actions happen within the protagonist's social domain. Even Sunny accuses his daughter of ignorance with regard to her complaint over the oppression of women by men. When he feels upset at the manner in which she stages her revolt against masculinity, tradition, and the plight of women, Sunny retorts "how many women do you know anyway, in your sheltered life?" (141). Definitely, there are no accounts of Enitan visiting villages, fetching water from streams or mingling with penurious women. Yet, at some point her narration presents a graphic description of the oppressed women. She claims that she is a witness to "how women respected men and ended up shouldering burdens like one of those people who carried firewood on their head, with their necks as high as church spires and foreheads crushed" (186). The novel

does not have an actual account of Enitan witnessing a scene like the one she describes here, apart from the women she meets in prison.

The question that complicates her knowledge of women's general situation in Nigeria is exactly the one posed by her father. Raised in a house "by Lagos Lagoon," and now resident in Sunrise Estate, Enitan admits that "there were parts of the city I'd never visited, parts I never needed to. Most of my country I had not seen, not even the Delta Grace Ameh spoke of. I only spoke one of our languages, Yoruba" (299). If we compare her neighborhood to Maroko in *Graceland* and Poverty Street in *Waiting for an Angel*, we will find no parallel between these places and Sunrise Estate or Lagos Lagoon. She further complicates her own awareness of women's condition when she reveals that "I [. . .] promised myself that I would no longer speak for women in my country, because, quite simply, I didn't know them all" (284). Enitan's realization of her limited knowledge of women in Nigeria, even in Lagos, does not invalidate her struggle for a better government, culture, and an egalitarian society. In spite of her social status as part of the elite, she does not allow privilege to impede her so much that she should not speak out against mistreatment of women and the unlawful detention of her father and Mukoro by the military government (299).

Interestingly, owing to its emphasis on the events that dominate its geographical location, *Everything* could be easily described as a Lagos novel, as a few critics have done already. In a dissertation titled "Postcolonial Readings of Resistance and Negotiation in Selected Contemporary African Writing," Ines Mzali identifies the text as description of life in Lagos in that the protagonist is so compartmentalized in the city that she is not aware of the happenings outside her urban space (239). Mzali contends that this novel is a "gender specific, and Lagos-centered perspective" in which the city "is hardly represented metonymically in relation to the

Nigerian nation as a whole” (248). At the same time, she notes that the decay and crisis in the city bear a resemblance to the political realities in Nigeria (249). In her reading of *Everything*, Mzali insists that the novel pales in comparison to the ways in which *Half of a Yellow Sun* depicts a more inclusive Nigeria that bursts into a bitter fight in Adichie’s text. Also, Rita Nnodim categorizes Atta’s work as a Lagos novel, arguing that it writes the city “as the site of a multiple and sprawling heterotopias” (322). In her discussion of this text with *Graceland* and *Waiting for an Angel*, she identifies “urban activism” and “local concerns,” arguing that in “writing Lagos,” *Everything* “further diversifies Nigerian novelistic imaginings of urban concerns and voices” rather than create “new utopian perspectives or imaginations of the postcolonial nation” (331). This point implies that Atta’s novel follows the pattern noticeable in earlier novels like Ekwensi’s *People of the City* and *Jagua Nana’s Daughter* in its exploration of city life at the expense of legislating a collective vision of the Nigerian nation-state.

Mzali applies Nnodim’s proposition to her analysis of *Everything*, and observes that locating the novel within a larger Nigerian setting beyond Lagos is complicated. This sort of reading is legitimate, but it risks the possibility of invalidating the concerns this narrative expresses over the country’s problems. Unlike Nnodim, Mzali does not engage with *Graceland* and *Waiting for an Angel*, other novels that portray characters that are based in Lagos, although Sunday and Elvis begin their journey from Afikpo. *City of Memories* speaks from Jos and Bolewa, while there is a brief mobility of characters across Lagos and Kano before a serious fight breaks out between Nigeria and Biafra in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Therefore, to argue, as Mzali does, that *Everything* is not “an engagement with a larger concept of the [Nigerian] nation” (268) because it is set in Lagos is not a fair assessment of the novel and a balanced recognition of its role in the representation of Nigeria’s political derailment. Even though she

later adds that “however limited in scope, the city [in *Everything*] remains unavoidably subjected to interrelated national and global politics” (268), Mzali refuses to consider the possibility that Lagos may be Nigeria’s melting pot in which diverse cultures and peoples converge. Also, she ignores the point that Enitan’s activism is directed toward “national authorities and institutions,” the government of her country and not that of Lagos. Through her engagement with the authorities, Atta’s protagonist realizes that aside from patriarchal dominance, the singular problem in her country is oppressive leadership that is at the top of the list of other social ills. Nonetheless, Mzali, and to a considerable extent Nnodim, is right to contend that *Everything* cannot be read easily “as national allegory” (268). The same conclusion is true about the other texts, including *Half of a Yellow Sun*, which she attempts to read as a foil of Atta’s novel in relation to the mode of national engagement through literary representations.

Finally, unlike the rest of the other novels studied in this work, *Everything* is a combination of two fundamental subjects. The first is a revolt against male domination, and the second is an engagement with the feeling of disappointment in Nigeria. Enitan’s transformative journey throughout the novel is significant to Atta’s portrayal of the country’s social impasse being lifted on the back of the women that Ogun-dipe-Leslie contends are “not remembered or planned for when anything is being shared in the Nigerian polity” (140). Unfortunately, these women, including the protagonist, are consistently pushed back by the federal government and patriarchal barriers at home. Nevertheless, the female bonding that is absent in the men’s novels is present in Atta’s text. As part of its achievement, *Everything* writes women into the public space so that they, too, can participate in the public discourse on the postcolonial condition of Nigeria. In *Graceland* and *Waiting for an Angel*, men’s presence in and domination of the public/political space are constant, especially in the reactions to the chaos all over the country.

*Everything* challenges this form of gender representation that not only conceptualizes women as less significant to the public discourse, but that also confines them to the domestic sphere where they are further oppressed by domestic tyranny. Ultimately, the novel suggests that the conflict it dramatizes is irresolvable as long as the country is afflicted by a plethora of social and political miseries. The ambivalences, gaps, and absences characterizing Enitan's fearless protest against the condition of her country notwithstanding, she speaks out against the authoritarian government on behalf of the oppressed people. Her voice amplifies the most silent snippets emanating from the voices of the common people in a motherland that treats "her children like bastards" (319). In the end, not only does Atta successfully engage in a dialogue with her literary predecessors on the roles of women in the struggles over Nigeria, but she also suggests a new way to read Nigerian women and the narratives that their post-independence experiences continue to produce. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is another contemporary Nigerian woman writer, but as the next chapter suggests, she engages with a different subject in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Reading the novel in relation to the geopolitical space depicted in *Everything* will be fascinating.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### “THE OPEN SORE” OF A COUNTRY: ETHNIC DYSPHORIA IN CHIMAMANDA

#### NGOZI ADICHIE’S *HALF OF A YELLOW SUN*

This chapter examines the impact of ethnic rivalries on the existence of Nigeria as a country by examining the devastating strife Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie portrays in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Through *Graceland*, *Waiting for an Angel*, and *Everything Good Will Come*, I have explored the predicament of individuals caught up in the tragic incidents that overwhelm Nigeria. References to the Civil War in these novels are slight and sometimes distant, but Adichie dwells on this crisis, and in doing so she produces a scintillating Biafra narrative. She begins by portraying a divided Nigerian federation as the starting point of the conflict in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. I argue that as the bloodshed rapidly moves to Biafra, it ceases to be known as a civil war, but a Nigerian-Biafran enmity escalating due to bitter ethnonational divides. Reading this novel allows me to understand the impact of the clash on the history of Nigeria and the serious implications of military intervention in the country’s politics. Keeping in mind Nduka Otiono’s suggestion in my Introduction that the Civil War and military dictatorships are recurrent themes in third generation fiction, my discussion in this chapter mainly focuses on Adichie’s effort to rewrite and remember Biafra from the view of Eastern Nigeria even if her contemporaries pay insignificant attention to the period of bloodletting in Igboland.

Adichie was born on September 15, 1977 in Enugu, one of the most famous cities in the Eastern part of Nigeria. She is one of the prominent figures among the contemporary Nigerian writers whose works attempt to animate the structural, social, and political problems in the country. She first broke on to the literary scene with the publication of her maiden novel, *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), for which she was awarded the Commonwealth Prize for best first book in

2005, barely one year after it was shortlisted for the Orange Prize. Following that success, Adichie has published *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), *The Thing around Your Neck* (2009), a collection of short stories, and *Americanah* (2013). In an interview with Aminatta Forna, Adichie reveals her interest is “writing realistic fiction set in Nigeria,” and asserts that she works hard to relay the experiences she has heard from other people or the ones she has imagined (51). She demonstrates this passion in her second novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun*. In a separate interview, Adichie explains that the history of the Civil War is her motive for writing this novel because her concern is to show what life was like in Biafra at the time (“Brief Conversation” 1). No question, she demonstrates this objective through the experiences of the main characters in the text.

*Yellow Sun* depicts a tumultuous moment when the Igbos struggled to break away from Nigeria and establish the Republic of Biafra in the 1960s. Adichie shows how the Igbo characters embrace the emergence of the Biafran nation as well as their feeling of its defeat by the federal forces that were determined to quash the secession and keep the country together at all costs. This agitation that promises to be the birth of a new country at the beginning rapidly degenerates into a crisis that exposes ethnic tensions in the country. Caught up in the conflict between Biafra and Nigeria are the protagonist Olanna and her lover, Odenigbo; her twin sister Kainene, along with her white British boyfriend, Richard; and Odenigbo’s thirteen-year-old houseboy, Ugwu, who acts as the narrator. There are other important characters, and their roles in shaping the conflict in the narrative will be discussed later in this chapter. More relevant aspects of *Yellow Sun* are love, politics, corruption, and ethnicity, which all crystallize into a narrative of war, displacement, and trauma, but this segment of my study will focus on the crisis that happens in Biafra and how it complicates inter-ethnic relations in Nigeria. Since the novel treats the

bloodshed as a Nigerian-Biafran war, the use of the more common designation, Nigerian Civil War, will be limited in the following discussion.

Remarkably, of all the texts that treat the Civil War, *Yellow Sun* is the only one that most intriguingly depicts a past whose aftermath continues to threaten the existence of Nigeria as a nation-state. Although the text transcends a mere war account, it adds a new twist to our understanding of the country and the devastating crisis that rocked it between 1967 and 1970. This novel recounts the anguish of the victims whose traumatic experiences remain part of the larger spectrum of Nigeria's dilemma to this day. Aside from challenging the notion that the country is a unified nation, *Yellow Sun* exposes/resurrects lingering questions about the colonial process that created the federation. The way in which the characters struggle to establish a new independent country shows that Nigeria is indeed a bare geographical formation inhabited by disparate elements that are forced to co-exist regardless of their dissimilar traditions, cultures, ideologies, and languages. This point is vital, and it is central to the argument of this chapter that *Yellow Sun* is both a manifestation and complication of the vague identity of post-independence Nigeria. As I explore this idea, my discussion will specifically emphasize the text's depiction of the fallout of a cataclysmic ethnic rivalry in the country, including the rise and fall of Biafra.

The novel grows from a strained relationship to a war story that centres on the household of Odenigbo and Olanna, two university professors and lovers whose affair is replete with betrayal and lack of trust. Olanna hails from a wealthy family, but Odenigbo, the narrator suggests, is the son of a superstitious country mother. The salon of friends both lovers keep is part of the Igbo elite, namely Professor Ezeka, Okeoma, Madu, and Kainene. Miss Adebayo, a Yoruba woman, also appears frequently in this group, but she does not identify with the Biafra

cause. Although the reader does not suspect it until the end of the novel, Ugwu takes charge of recording the Odenigbo-Olanna union before, during, and after the war. Odenigbo and Olanna argue about a variety of subjects popular with the intellectuals of young African countries at the time, notably democracy, politics, and nationalism. Olanna is afraid of getting married to Odenigbo because she fears “that marriage would flatten” their happy bond and transform it into “a prosaic partnership” (65). To worsen this fear, Odenigbo’s mother, Mama, is opposed to his son marrying Olanna. When she visits Nsukka in the company of Amala, a young woman from her village, she warns Olanna to “leave my son alone.” Mama worries that Olanna “is controlling my son,” and that she is the reason her “son has not yet married while his mates are counting how many children they have,” accusing Olanna of using “witchcraft to hold him” (123). Olanna leaves Odenigbo’s house because she cannot withstand this rejection. Mama charges that Olanna’s father is a corrupt federal tax collector who “stole from hardworking people” (123), and “Her mother is no better” (124). She disqualifies Olanna as a good wife because “it was servants who wiped her *ike* when she finished shitting. And on top of it her parents sent her to university.” Mama argues that excessive “schooling ruins a woman; everyone knows it. It gives woman a big head and she will start to insult her husband.” She also says she does not want for her son a “*Wawa* woman, and none of those Imo or Aro women” because “their dialects are so strange I wonder who told them we are all the same Igbo people” (124).

After Mama’s departure to her village, Olanna returns to the house, and Ugwu is happy. Her encounter with Mama makes her question her future with Odenigbo. She wants “a sign, a rainbow, to signify security. Still she was relieved to ease back into her life, their life, of teaching and tennis and friends that filled the living room” (133). Mama’s second visit with Amala has a serious repercussion on the relationship between Olanna and Odenigbo, who sleeps with her in

Olanna's absence (279-80). After Olanna discovers this act of betrayal, and in spite of Odenigbo's apologies, she retaliates by seducing her sister's boyfriend, the Englishman Richard (292-93). Not too long after, Kainene learns about the illicit love-making between her lover and her sister, but she is calm about it, although the incident fractures her relationship with Olanna up to the middle of the war. Odenigbo's one-night affair with Amala results in a pregnancy and the birth of a girl. Because Amala refuses to touch and care for her new born, Olanna decides to look after and christen her Baby. She raises the girl with a lot of help from Ugwu. Prior to the war, Odenigbo and Olanna manage their "uneasy development into a family" by returning to Umuahia to marry (Krishnan, "Biafra" 190). Following the crisis, Odenigbo, Olanna, Ugwu, and Baby take cover in Biafra, their new native land (*Yellow Sun* 252-53).

Not surprisingly, the war has some serious effects on Odenigbo and his family. First, his mother is killed, and he can do nothing to stop the bloodshed. He hides in a bunker with Olanna, Ugwu, and Baby to avoid being bombed by Nigerian soldiers and to avoid being conscripted by the Biafran forces. The bunker does not last for long, and Odenigbo has to look for another place to live. Olanna warns Ugwu to always stay in the compound, and if necessary, to stay indoors so that the Biafran fighters will not forcefully enlist him in their army. This fear is soon realized when Olanna discovers that her houseboy is conscripted and driven to the battlefield with no prior combat experience. She assumes that this is the end of Ugwu. During a patrol, the soldiers of the unit to which Ugwu belongs storm a bar, rape the bargirl, and force him to do the same. The shame and memory of the rape last with him for a long time.

Meanwhile, Kainene pays a surprise visit to Olanna. She moves her sister, Baby, and Odenigbo to the refugee camp she manages with the help of volunteers and Richard. Before and

after leaving for the refugee camp, Olanna searches for Ugwu but to no avail. She is also worried that her husband continues slipping into depression. Hit and wounded by enemy bullets, Ugwu is rescued by his fellow infantrymen that manage to escape the onslaught from Nigerian soldiers. Luckily, he is dropped off at a hospital where he is recognized by the Reverend Father Damian, a priest whom he used to visit at the St. Vincent de Paul Catholic Church in the company of Olanna. Damian sends a message to Odenigbo, and Richard is asked to bring Ugwu to the refugee camp. Ugwu recovers at the camp, helps to run it, and lives there until the war ends.

More importantly, *Yellow Sun* complicates Nigeria's history. By the time the war breaks out, the people that were previously regarded as Nigerian citizens suddenly become Biafrans and adversaries of the federation. As the Igbos fight to protect their secession from Nigeria, they regard their former country as the "Other" territory. To them, Nigeria is over there while Biafra is here as an independent Igbo nation. John Marx captures the instability of Nigeria and the vulnerability of Biafra in *Yellow Sun*, arguing that the novel "presents the Biafran War as an instance of state failure twice over—first, a Nigerian failure so severe that it led to civil war and a breakaway republic and, second, the Biafran state's own collapse under attack from Nigeria and international allies" (611). Put in a larger context, the tragedy of the war and the events preceding it is the failure of Nigeria to overcome ethnic politics, although the federation still exists in the novel afterwards. Yet, the implication is that the country's identity is false, as demonstrated by the fight of a major ethnic group to affirm its desire to cease existing as part of a country formed through colonialism.

The foregoing discussion is intended to lay bare the strategy Adichie adopts in her dissection of Nigeria's elusive unity and the extent to which her narrative of the war implicates

ethnic zealotry in the bloodshed over Biafra. The path to exposing ethnic loyalty begins with the assassination of the Prime Minister by a group of soldiers, the majority of whom are Igbo. Most of the casualties of the coup are Hausas. One of the guests visiting with Odenigbo to discuss this unfortunate crisis celebrates it as “the end of corruption” (158). Although Ugwu does not remember the name of the character, nor does he suggest his ethnic affiliation, the instant reaction to the coup among the Igbo elite and/or revolutionary group present in Odenigbo’s house is partisan. First, showing no emotion, this unnamed individual praises this bloody military action as “what we needed to happen” to correct the anomalies in Nigeria’s political system. The genuineness of the reason for this coup d’état is even more questionable not only at the time Okeoma raises his arm, saying “Those majors are true heroes!” but also when the text informs the reader that “There was excitement in” the voices of Odenigbo’s and Olanna’s friends “even when they talked about the people who were killed” (158). Second, immediately following this reaction is a quiet friction between Olanna and Professor Ezeka, Odenigbo’s friend and university colleague, about the ethnicities of the casualties. The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) already calls the overthrow “an Igbo coup” simply because, as Olanna observes, “It was mostly Northerners who were killed” (159). Ezeka quickly refutes that notion, reminding her that “It was mostly Northerners who were in government.” Miss Adebayo, the only Yoruba in the gathering, cautions against Odenigbo’s admiration of the coup leader Major Nzeogwu, and for making “a theoretical case for the military” (159). The common response among the Igbos present suggests a strong bond between them and the masterminds of this violent power play. Since the coup targets and leads to the deaths of many Hausa political figures, it is not surprising that it is usually termed an all Igbo revolt in a country that is already divided along ethnic lines.

Following this shock, the emergence of an Igbo head of state gives further credence to the insinuation that the Nigerian population already have over the military takeover of power.

In addition to exposing ethnic chauvinism in the country, the countercoup is a much bloodier incident that is widely interpreted as a reprisal against the architects and beneficiaries of the first coup, notably because it is a project of the Northerners in the Nigerian army (see Falola and Heaton 174; Osaghae 60). Odenigbo and his comrades cannot laugh at or make any case for the Nigerian military in the wake of this retaliation that escalates to violence in the North. Their anxieties worsen following the killings of the Igbos by the Hausas. Olanna visits her Uncle Mbaezi in Sabon Gari, in Kano, before the violence begins. During the riots in the North, the Hausas kill her uncle and his wife, Ifeka, along with their pregnant daughter, Arize. Surrounded by the demonstrators, who are prepared to attack her, Olanna manages to escape with the help of her former Hausa lover, Mohammed, with whom she also visits (184-87). The massacre of the Igbos by the Northerners is summed up in the horror she witnesses again on her traumatic journey back to the East: a woman carries with her a calabash containing the head of her murdered daughter. Olanna looks into the calabash, and sees “the little girl’s head with the ashy-gray skin and the braided hair and rolled-back eyes and open mouth.” She stares “at it for a while before” looking away (188).

Similarly, Richard witnesses a shocking incident of inhumanity in Kano after his plane from London lands there. At the airport, he meets Nnaemeka, a young Igbo training to be a customs officer (190). The brief conversation between these two men makes Richard feel close to Igboland. Suddenly, three soldiers burst in “holding up long rifles.” They ask for Igbo people whom they call “the infidels” (192). Seeing Nnaemeka, they question if he is Igbo or not. For



fear of his life, he denies, and responds “I come from Kastina! Kastina!” (192). One of the soldiers asks him to say “Allahu Akbar!” (192). Unable to do so, “Nnaemeka knelt down. Richard saw fear etched so deeply onto his face that it collapsed his cheeks and transfigured him into a mask that looked nothing like him. He would not say Allahu Akbar because his accent would give him away.” As much as Richard wants him to say something to spare his life, Nnaemeka is helpless in the wildness of these soldiers looking for Igbo people to kill. While Richard watches his entrapped interlocutor, “the rifle went off and Nnaemeka’s chest blew open, a splattering red mass” (192). The soldiers continue their rampage, shooting the bartender and then “ran out to the tarmac and into the airplane and pulled out Igbo people who had already boarded and lined them up and shot them and left them lying there, their bright clothes splashes of color on the dusty black stretch. The security guards folded their arms across their uniforms and watched.” Frightened by this brutality, “Richard felt himself wet his trousers. There was a painful ringing in his ears. He almost missed his flight because, as the other passengers walked shakily to the plane, he stood aside vomiting” (192-93). He recounts this incident to Nnaemeka’s parents when he meets them later in Obosi (206-08).

On his part, Odenigbo is surprised that the Gowon administration does nothing to stop the killings of Igbos in the North. The scenes separately witnessed by Olanna and Richard are the reasons Odenigbo and Ezeka invoke the voice of the pan-Igbo leader, Nnamdi Azikwe, to legitimize their call for a new republic. Miss Adebayo feels that “the important thing is to find a way to make peace before things explode” (199). Odenigbo counters by insisting that there is no basis for peace. He argues that “If Gowon wanted to keep this country together, he would have done something long ago. For goodness’ sake, not one of them has come out to condemn the massacres, and months have passed! It is as if all our people who were killed don’t matter.” If the

Igbo people are to enjoy peace and security, Odenigbo asserts, “Secession is the only answer” (199). Odenigbo, Ezeka, Madu, and Okeoma are advocates of the pan-Igbo agitation for a Biafran nation to emerge out of Nigeria. The crisis that engulfs the country at this point is blown beyond control so much so that the agitators at both ends see nothing but irreconcilable differences between each other. Odenigbo recalls Gowon, the new head of state, saying “a basis for unity does not exist” (199). Odenigbo’s objective here is to strengthen his stance that the Igbos must reject any peace pact offered by Gowon and create “a new country, which would be named after the bay, the Bight of Biafra” (198).

Later, another conversation between Miss Adebayo and Odenigbo exposes the ethnic animosity that fuels the war in *Yellow Sun*. Odenigbo accuses Miss Adebayo of not being sensitive to the killings of the Igbo people, and he challenges her view on the secession project: “what about our university colleagues in Ibadan and Zaria and Lagos? Who is speaking about this? They kept silent while white expatriates encouraged the rioters to kill Igbo people.” He alleges that she “would be one of them if” she “didn’t happen to be in Igboland.” Odenigbo doubts Miss Adebayo’s sympathy, and he in fact contends she has none for saying “that secession is not the only way to security” (218). When she points out to Odenigbo that her suggestion is not devoid of sympathy, he even takes his allegation further: “Did your cousin die? Did your uncle die? You’re going back to your people in Lagos next week and nobody will harass you for being Yoruba. Is it not your own people who are killing the Igbo in Lagos? Didn’t a group of chiefs go to the North to thank the emirs for sparing the Yoruba people? So what are you saying? How is your opinion relevant?” (218-19). Odenigbo’s reaction to Miss Adebayo’s views on the secession here portrays the ethnic divide between the major ethnic groups that make up Nigeria. He blames the Yoruba people for colluding with the Hausas to kill his own people.

His friend, Miss Adebayo, suddenly becomes an enemy because of her ethnicity in this regard. Even though, on Olanna's insistence, Odenigbo later reluctantly agrees to apologize to Miss Adebayo, his comments represent a sudden explosion of bitter ethnic sentiments in Nigeria and their impact on the war in Biafra.

As the narrator takes the reader closer to the war zone, the narrative invalidates the previous designations of this crisis as the Nigerian Civil War. As far as *Yellow Sun* is concerned, this is not a civil war in a unitary country. Instead, it is the repression of the Biafran nation by the armed forces of the Nigerian government. The war highlights and exacerbates the difference between these two groups. Biafra is the Igbos' alternative to Nigeria. The Igbos are determined to fight for their new country, and liberate it at all costs, not minding shedding their own blood. In the latter part of the novel, the reader meets characters that are apprehensive about the invasion of their territory by the Nigerian forces empowered to take back Biafra by all means necessary. To Ugwu, Odenigbo, Olanna, Kainene, Pastor Ambrose, Mama Oji, Mrs. Muokelu, and so on, Nigerians are wicked enemies invading Biafra from a foreign country. Pastor Ambrose, often accused of covering up his cowardice with prayers and babbling, especially by his neighbor Mama Oji, defines Nigeria as another country and the assailant of the people of Biafra. During one of his prayer sessions, Ambrose curses Nigeria and its allies: "God bless His Excellency [Ojukwu]! God give Tanzania and Gabon strength [for recognizing the state of Biafra]! God destroy Nigeria and Britain and Egypt and Algeria and Russia! In the mighty name of Jesus" (424). He takes his petition seriously when he screams "Jehovah destroy Gowon and Adekunle!" (424). Gowon has been introduced in the first chapter, but the allusion to Adekunle here is particularly interesting in view of the role he played during the war.

Colonel Benjamin Adekunle led the Third Commando Division of the Nigerian Army that eventually sacked the Biafrans' last stronghold, Umuahia. Born to a Hausa mother and a Yoruba father, and trained at Sandhurst, Adekunle was regarded as an aggressive military officer who was partly intent on using the war to have his revenge against Ojukwu for deliberately failing him in a promotion test (Hughes 54; Gould 99-100). To this day, Adekunle is remembered as one of the most dangerous commanders during the war (Gould 104-05). As hilarious as Ambrose's prayer may sound, it embodies an extreme reaction to the war brought to his homeland by the place he considers another country. This prayer accentuates the total resistance of the Igbo people against Nigeria, and it dismisses his former country as a legitimate state. Ambrose has no gun and courage to fight, yet the bombings and gunshots from soldiers and mercenaries of the Nigerian forces in the compound where he and several people hide make him a vulnerable target of destruction. At least, if he cannot respond with sophisticated weapons, he is at liberty to invoke a supernatural power to fight for his new country. Only Ambrose can tell if such metaphysical power is able to win the war for Biafra.

Furthermore, there is no way one can prove Mama Oji's perception of Ambrose as a coward for not taking his fight with Nigeria to the battlefield. Since Ambrose is not the only character in the novel that hides from conscription, it is hard to consider him timid. While Odenigbo takes shelter in the same compound as Ambrose, an unnamed individual complains that Mama Oji's husband escapes from the war front, and goes into hiding so that we see no trace of him in the entire novel (424). Ambrose prays for Biafra's success during the war, but the only physical weapon he carries is his Bible. Aside from pledging his loyalty to Biafra, he interprets the conflict as one of the popular wars between the ancient Israelites and their foes in several wars in the Bible. Even with limited weaponry and effort, these Israelites prevailed over their

enemies whenever their hearts were right with God. This narrative provides a context for Ambrose's reliance on God to win the war for Biafra. Inferred from his action is the image that Gowon is another Pharaoh preventing the Israelites (the Igbos) from departing to the land given to them by God after they had spent four hundred years in slavery in Egypt (Exodus 6.11). In addition to seeking a total annihilation of Nigeria for humiliating the people of Biafra, Ambrose invites the Israelites' God to come to the side of Biafra to destroy Gowon for his hardheartedness, and he is not alone in his wish.

Not only does Mrs. Muokelu, a sharp-tongued character, speak of Nigeria and Biafra as two different countries distant from each other, but she is also the embodiment of a strong animosity against the polity to which she previously belonged. She dreams of a Biafran victory to be handed down by God to the Igbos. The reason the war is not yet over, according to her, is Biafra's lack of weapons. "If we [Biafrans] had people pouring guns and planes into our hands as they pour into Nigeria," she boasts, "this thing would have ended a long time ago and everybody would be in his own house by now. But we will conquer them. Is God sleeping? No!" Aside from demonstrating her disdain toward Nigeria, Mrs. Muokelu also sees injustice in the assault on the Igbo people by Gowon and his country. This is the reason she categorizes Nigeria as an ungodly country that takes delight in killing innocent people. Climbing "out of the bunker," where she and the other people take refuge whenever the sound of the enemy's bomber is heard, Mrs. Muokelu is driven by the amount of destruction in the wake of an earlier attack to remark "those heathens have bombed our school" (350). The ungodliness she ascribes to Nigeria is meant to characterize the country's war on Biafra as evil, unjust, immoral, and unworthy of victory. Her objective is to cement the image of Nigeria in the reader's mind as an invading country whose brutal assault on another sovereign territory is nothing short of genocide. For Mrs.

Muokelu, Biafrans go about their own business, and Nigerians are the aggressors. In her mind, the latter are guilty of killing innocent people whose crime, as reflected in the entire novel, is declaring a secession for which they have a legitimate right.

Unlike Mrs. Muokelu and Ambrose, the other characters caught in the war imagine Biafra's victory through daydreaming. After the bombing mentioned above, Ugwu oversees his own army in a former primary school building, teaching a group of children Biafran patriotism to the extent that Odenigbo is impressed to proudly acknowledge that his "wife and Ugwu are changing the face of the next generation of Biafrans with their Socratic pedagogy" (368). Here, Odenigbo imagines a new community and victory over their adversaries, while another unnamed male character declares that "Biafra will win this war, God has written it in the sky," even amidst heavy fighting between the two groups (362). The children in the second refugee camp visited by Richard and two foreign journalists also feel the impact of the war on the young people's lives. Surprisingly, these kids are not ignorant of Nigeria being another country ostensibly governed by the Hausas. Their knowledge and perception of the strife come clear when they claim that "the Hausa vandals wanted to kill all of us, but God was not asleep" (465). In spite of their trauma, the children are confident "Biafra will win very soon" (465). Important to consider here is how rapidly Biafran patriotism spreads across the Igboland.

Odenigbo and Olanna play a significant role in generating this feeling. To celebrate the birth of his new nation, the former wears ceremonial clothing made with the Biafran flag. While volunteering as a school teacher during the war, Olanna teaches the kids in her class about the Biafran cause, an effort her husband says erases her reluctance and qualifies her as "an equal

participant in the war effort” (353). Odenigbo’s sentiment is previously validated by Olanna’s teaching:

She taught them about the Biafran flag. They sat on wooden planks and the weak morning sun streamed into the roofless class as she unfurled Odenigbo’s cloth flag and told them what the symbols meant. Red was the blood of the siblings massacred in the North, black was for mourning them, green was for the prosperity Biafra would have, and, finally, the half of a yellow sun stood for the glorious future. She taught them to raise their hand in the flying salute like His Excellency and she asked them to copy her drawings of the two leaders: His Excellency was burly, sketched with double lines, while Gowon’s effete body was outlined in single lines. (352)

Then “Nkiruka, her brightest student, shaded contours into the faces and, with a few strokes of her pencil, gave Gowon a snarl and His Excellency a grin” (353). Olanna’s objective is to instill in her students a strong sense of loyalty to Biafra. She wants them to be able to feel, imbibe, and live for the cause of their new homeland. She wants them to differentiate between Biafra and Nigeria, and understand that there is no Civil War going on, but a lethal aggression on a sovereign Biafran nation by Gowon and his people. In the excerpt above, Olanna introduces these kids to their new leader, Ojukwu, portraying him as heroic and humane. This is not an illegitimate effort in the middle of a war. Olanna is Biafran the moment the Igbo people secede from Nigeria. Thus, her patriotic teaching is suitable for the secession cause. Her students’ parents are most likely dead as a result of the killings. So, it is understandable why these children feel that Gowon is a wicked Hausa aggressor.

In view of the huge toll of casualties on Biafra's side, it is strange to hear these survivors of displaced and dead Biafrans envision victory over the Nigerian fighters that are equipped with more sophisticated weapons and supported by more countries. The reaction of these children symbolizes the evil of the ethnic nationalism and discontents that generate this disastrous war in the first place. Experiences of the Biafrans alone, as relayed in *Yellow Sun*, indicate to the reader that the conflict thrives on ethnic hatred to a devastating effect. Trapped and ambushed on every side, these individuals must dream to ease their tension of the moment, and to temporarily escape from the reality of the bloodshed into which they are now immersed. It is interesting how Adichie imagines the tumultuous world in which these characters live and are trapped. Jane Bryce describes this world as a small space "of incremental retreat, minute daily adaptations and personal accommodations that, taken altogether, spell a story of collective hardship and suffering" (61). Bryce imagines these people reeling through an unstoppable agony as one unit that is ensnared in sustained intervals of animosity and fear by volleys of gunfire and bombings. Their lives are devastated by the bloodletting happening around them. In order to escape the trauma of the war, these people must imagine they are conquerors at the expense of the external forces ravaging their lives with no restraints.

Reinforced in the preceding analysis is the idea that *Yellow Sun* portrays Nigeria as a country marked by daily conflicts. In her review of the novel, E. Frances White notes with surprise "the almost seamless way people move from thinking of themselves as Nigerians to thinking of themselves as Biafrans. How quickly the word 'Nigerian' shifts from self-identity to epithet. Comrades become vandals; neighbors become saboteurs. People no longer see their destinies as intertwined" (10). White suggests that the drumbeats of war quickly change the tune of the songs hummed by Nigerians prior to independence and the crisis. The nationalistic task of



keeping Nigeria as one suddenly collapses, and what replaces that effort is a bloody contention over Biafra. The totality of the story of the war in *Yellow Sun* is a firm suspension of the idea of Nigeria as it was known before the first coup. The Nigeria portrayed at the beginning of the novel includes the Igbos and the few minority groups when secession from the federation was yet to be conceived, or perhaps, still in the offing. For instance, we see mobility across the country with Olanna traveling to Lagos, Kano, and Nsukka, and Odenigbo attending a conference at the University of Ibadan. The Igbos living and killed in the North also provide us good examples. After the Biafrans surrender following the escape of Ojukwu and their suppression by the invading forces through starvation, the reader re-encounters Nigeria, this time with a more broken, traumatized, and brutalized identity. Revolutionary characters like Odenigbo experience depression during the war. The conflict incapacitates him so much that he “retreat[s] into himself and look[s] out at the world with bleary weary eyes” (477). The bloodshed leaves more bitter memories for Olanna. First, her husband diminishes in strength and courage, while her sister disappears at the end of the novel. Second, on their way back to Nsukka, Olanna and Odenigbo are subjected to inimical military cruelty. Their safety after the war is not guaranteed because they live under military surveillance for belonging to the Igbo literary elite and, more importantly, for being Igbo. Memories such as these make *Yellow Sun* a scintillating book on the horror that details the disturbing past of Nigeria.

Besides, *Yellow Sun* is another social commentary on the aftermath of one of the most disturbing realities that continue to haunt post-independence Nigeria. Although Bryce focuses on seven women’s novels published between 2000 and 2006 in her engagement with the third generation fiction writing from Nigeria, she brilliantly delves into the ways these contemporary texts portray previous events in the country. After she admits that the third generation novels re-

enact the recent past of Nigeria and other mishaps that would set the country on a path redefining its postcolonial identity, she encourages the reader to read *Yellow Sun* as a “powerfully evocative and convincing fictional drama of individual characters set against [. . .] realist rendering[s] of a particular time and place” (54). Bryce maintains that reading the text as a piece of history takes away from it the pleasure of reading imaginative literature. As much as this observation is perceptive, it is difficult not to locate *Yellow Sun* within history since what the novel does is epitomize the exact event that personified ethnic division in Nigeria. Adichie implicates ethnicity in the politics that ravages a significant part of Nigeria. There is no denying that several texts dealing with this war have already been published. While Elechi Amadi and Chinua Achebe have written on the experiences of the victims of the war, Buchi Emecheta’s *Destination Biafra* focuses on the battle over Biafra despite its protagonist being a Yoruba woman. Bryce commends *Yellow Sun* for being “the only one of the[se] novels to treat the Civil War head on” (58). Her reasoning is that the first few novels about the conflict spoke from positions too close to the bloody scene of Biafra. John Hawley contends that some of the writers who had maintained closest proximity “to the Biafran fighting wrote scathingly and with immediacy [. . .] as if the writers were reporters seeking to draw the world’s attention to an ongoing injustice that had to be attended to and stopped *now*” (“Biafra” 17). Hawley implies that missing from the first novels published after the crisis was a narrative flavour. In this case, those texts could only have passed as documentaries on a Biafran battlefield dominated by “bloodletting and starvation that” were “either ongoing, or still vivid in the mind’s eye” (17).

Despite Hawley’s argument, it is not accurate to conclude that the writings immediately following the Biafran conflict are not compelling and realistic. For instance, Amadi’s *Sunset Biafra*, Soyinka’s *The Man Died*, and Emecheta’s *Destination Biafra*, to name a few, are

compelling narratives of the war. These novels are only generally faulty because of their emotional attachment to the crisis. The distance between them and the war is too close for them “to turn suffering and commitment into art” (Hawley, “Biafra”18). It is not surprising therefore that Hawley echoes Eddie Iroh’s prediction of the time when a literary work with a much wider distance from the war would emerge (Hawley, “Biafra”15, 18). Hawley and Bryce adjudge *Yellow Sun* as the text Iroh predicted. Aside from its compelling style, this novel provides a fascinating portrayal of Nigeria as a country that is overwhelmed with tragedy because of its inability to overcome ethnic chauvinism. Adichie herself admits “that many of the books written about that period are more interested in the larger and grander narratives than in the small things that make up day-to-day life” (“Brief Conversation” 5). She brings this motive to bear in the relationship between the ordinary people in the novel, which is another fascinating version of the Nigerian-Biafran enmity from the perspective of the East.

By and large, *Yellow Sun* is a symbol of Biafra as a contested space rather than the scene of military clashes. Contrary to Hawley’s contention that the narrative is emotionally detached from the war, *Yellow Sun* is told from the perspective of Ugwu, a young boy who experiences the war and supplies firsthand information on it to the reader. In the end, Adichie draws the reader’s attention to the ruthless violence committed against the Biafran space that Ugwu, Olanna, Kainene, and Odenigbo consider their home and heritage. For Ugwu, the war is between Nigeria and Biafra, with the former conspiring with a host of international accomplices against a poorly armed, impoverished, weak, and extremely vulnerable people. Hence, “The World Was Silent When We Died” becomes the title of a book whose narrative authority Adichie assigns to Ugwu (*Yellow Sun* 530).

One would expect Adichie to cede the authority of narrating the story of Biafra to either Odenigbo or Olanna, given that they are endowed with much stronger academic prowess and intellectual insight. The narrative technique Adichie adopts in this novel is intriguing; it distances her from the scene of the conflict and the sentiments of the characters inside Biafra. In spite of Olanna's warning to Ugwu to avoid being conscripted by Biafran fighters, the sole responsibility Adichie delegates to him to legislate and, as Marx notes, to "compose the definitive book on Biafra" is incomplete until he spends some "time in the army" against his own will and that of his master and mistress. Marx adds that Ugwu's capture and involuntary enrollment in the war help to prepare him "to do the work of writing" (599). He must come face-to-face with the trauma and horror of bombings, gunshots, and the other atrocities of the war to legitimize his writing about the lives of ordinary people in Biafra. These remarks on Ugwu's experience explain why Richard concedes to him the right to recount the events in the novel. Before readers realize that Ugwu is the narrator, there are reasons to assume that the narrative voice is Richard's. First, it is his intention to write about the war and life in Biafra (496). Second, the title of the book, "The World Was Silent When We Died," comes from Richard (530). He does not develop the plot of the story immediately, choosing instead to "write it after the war, a narrative of Biafra's difficult victory and indictment of the world." In the end, however, he surprisingly yields to the home-schooled Ugwu the responsibility to narrate the Nigerian-Biafran war, including "what happened before, and how much should not have happened" (496). During a conversation between him and Ugwu, Richard admits he changes his mind about the book he plans to write because "The war isn't my story to tell, really" (530).

The atrocities perpetrated during the war bring painful memories to Ugwu, haunt and fill "him with shame," especially when he thinks "about that girl in the bar, her pinched face and the

hate in her eyes as she lay on her back on the dirty floor” (496). Yet, Richard is convinced that the story of Biafra is legitimate and most suitable from the perspective of this boy only because Ugwu has a firsthand account of the oppression that dislocates and desolates his fellow Biafrans. Not only does his short time fighting against the Nigerian forces transform him from being timid to daring, Ugwu’s trauma, his rape of the helpless bar girl to affirm his manliness before his gang, and his time in the refugee camp all constitute a haunting memory he must relate to the people that did not fight in the war or those that emotionally and physically participated in the Nigerian-Biafran conflict but must now remember it in order to heal themselves. Perhaps, this is the main reason Adichie anoints Ugwu as the author of the Biafra war story.

Indeed, this text captures the Biafran people that are not physically present at the scene of the war. Ambrose, Mrs. Muokelu, Olanna, Odenigbo, and the children in the refugee camp are not involved in shooting and bombing their people’s enemies. In spite of their physical detachment from the battlefield, it is the memories of these victims, not those of the fighters, that *Yellow Sun* conveys to the reader. As for Ugwu, he only has to fight or witness the consequences of the bloodshed to concretize his duplication of the strife through this narrative. The story that emerges from his memory afterwards testifies to the legacy of the ineptitude of local leadership, to a greater extent, and the aftermath of the colonial process in Nigeria. To this end, Bryce argues that *Yellow Sun* is a “text of contemporary social reality” that is “haunted by traces of a repressed past.” The novel represents that past as “preeminently the Civil War: its legacy of violation, both of people and democratic forms of organization” (59). What Bryce implies is the notion that the postcolonial condition, including the political failures and socioeconomic realities in contemporary Nigeria, is, partly, inevitably linked to the outcome of the war.

Adichie is not the only writer who speaks about the conflict; contemporary writers from other parts of the country also mention it in their works. In *Graceland*, for instance, Abani recalls the effect of this hostility to Elvis after he and his father leave Afikpo for Lagos. Elvis's memories of the war haunt him in his new home, where he grapples with unpleasant challenges. Madhu Krishnan summarizes the impact of the war on him this way: "his cousin Innocent, mad since his return from the Biafran War where he had been conscripted as a boy soldier, is paid by Elvis's father and uncle to kill another cousin, Godfrey" (4). These instances are the extension of the violation and abuses that characterize the destructive fighting in *Yellow Sun*. Without question, Innocent's insanity and instinct to murder his cousin result from his witnessing of and forced participation in the killings in Biafra.

Whereas the reader is invited to participate in the experiences of the victims of the strife in *Yellow Sun*, the bloodshed is imaginary to Enitan in *Everything Good Will Come*. Atta's protagonist learns about political events through her father's friends when she is seven years old. The first is "Uncle Alex, a sculptor, who smoked a pipe that smelled like melted coconut" (8). The second is Uncle Fatai, who like her father is a law graduate from Cambridge, and whom Enitan says "made me laugh because his name fitted his roly-poly face" (8-9). From the arguments between these men and Sunny, Enitan hears about the coups in Nigeria. Then, based on the war, she assumes that "the Biafrans were trying to split our country in two." After Alex parts ways with Fatai and Sunny over an emotional argument about the crisis, Enitan continues to listen "to radio bulletins on how our troops were faring against the Biafrans" (9). Alex eventually joins the Biafrans, and dies fighting against Nigeria. After coming reaching adulthood, Enitan understands the strife between Nigeria and Biafra a lot better. Speaking of her boyfriend Mike, an Igbo man, and herself, a Yoruba, she admits that:

It was terrible that we'd had different experiences of the Civil War. In university, I finally acknowledged the holocaust that was Biafra, through memoirs and history books, and pictures of limbless people; children with their stomachs bloated from kwashiorkor and their rib cages as thin as leaf veins. Their parents were mostly dead. Executed. Macheted. Blown up. Beheaded. There were accounts of blood-drinking, flesh-eating, atrocities of the human spirit that only a civil war could generate, while in Lagos we had carried on as though it were happening in a different country. Our Head of State got married even. (86)

In *Yellow Sun*, Miss Adebayo is the closest match to Enitan. On seeing Odenigbo and Olanna return to Nsukka, she validates Enitan's account when she remarks that "we didn't really understand what was happening in Biafra. Life went on and women were wearing the latest lace in Lagos" (528). Miss Adebayo's confession captures the mood of several people living outside the scene of the conflict, but the experiences of all of these characters constitute a commentary on Nigeria as a nation-state that is bedevilled by the atrocities of its pernicious past.

It is interesting how these writers recall the tragedy of Biafra and partly connect it implicitly to the menace of ongoing problems in the country. Hawley suggests that contemporary Nigerian fiction, *Yellow Sun* included, may "have become the only effective means to digest the poison of the past, and to slowly heal from within the damage that has been done" (16). This observation legitimizes the notion that the story of bloodletting in Adichie's novel explains a significant part of Nigeria's past and guilt. However, it is extremely hard to determine, merely by recalling the damage done, the amount of healing the text can bring to the country and the victims of its leaders' actions. Each time this destruction is revisited, it implicates the ethnic

sentiments of the Nigerian population and the misguided rapacity of their political/military leaders in the woes that betide the country.

Not surprisingly, Chinua Achebe's *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra* reinforces the tragedies of the individuals in Adichie's novel. As its subtitle suggests, this memoir is Achebe's version of Biafra. On the surface, the book's title implies that Biafra was a temporary sovereign country. In the end, the text is a clear indication of the endless problem of ethnic animosity in the geopolitical space known as Nigeria. Rather than recommend an antidote for the problem, the text unintentionally reifies a fanatically partisan view of the negative side effects of ethnic divides in the country, portraying the Igbos as victims of oppression by everybody else in the federation. For example, the author reinforces a bold claim in his earlier work, *The Trouble with Nigeria*, that "Nigerians will probably achieve consensus on no other matter than their common resentment of the Igbo people" (74). This statement reveals Achebe's thinking and frame of mind on the unity and crisis in the country. He negates the inclusion of the Igbos in the federal system so much so that a less informed reader can easily think of them as members of another country forcefully annexed to Nigeria, and fiercely persecuted for being Igbo. This thought is more dangerously pronounced when Achebe states that "There was a strong sense that Nigeria was no longer habitable for the Igbos and many other peoples from Eastern Nigeria" (87), and that "Nigeria did not belong to us. [. . .] The country had not embraced us, the Igbo people and other Easterners, as full-fledged members of the Nigerian family" (87). He maintains that this mistreatment of the Igbos by the rest of Nigeria informed their decision to secede and the war that resulted in the aftermath.



In his justification of the secessionist project in *There Was a Country*, Achebe legitimizes Ojukwu's declaration of a new Igbo nation, contending that having championed the movement for independence of the country, "Biafrans were later driven out by the rest of Nigeria, which waged war with the secessionist republic to conserve the very sovereignty of a nation (Nigeria) within whose walls Biafrans did not feel free, safe, or desired" (97). This is a serious accusation, one that has been impossible to validate with credible, objective, and impersonal sources. At best, it is a personal feeling of fear, alienation, and an assumption in which the rest of Nigerians are implicated. More so, it is a sentiment that Achebe assumes the Igbo people share. A careful reading of this book, as well as the history of Nigeria provided in the early part of this study, suggests that the war and the events leading to it were serious repercussions of the rivalries and broken relationship among the dominant ethnic groups in the country.

In his earlier writing about the crisis in *On a Darkling Plain: An Account of the Nigerian Civil War*, the late writer and activist Ken Saro-Wiwa states that "competition between the three largest ethnic groups in Nigeria brought about the civil war and continues to threaten to destroy the country" (11). Saro-Wiwa was a member of the Ogoni, a minority ethnic group, and he lived in both Ibadan (West) and Nsukka (East) prior to the war (37, 55). In general, he is critical of the failure of his country to avoid this calamitous strife, although he disapproves of the Igbos' resolve to form another republic and their mistreatment of minority groups within the territory they claimed, including Saro-Wiwa's, which they marked and incorporated into the map of Biafra (98, 113-15). In his description of the few months that he spent at the University of Nsukka before the conflict began, Saro-Wiwa expresses a strong disappointment with the local elite and pundits who beat the drum of war, and promised a Biafra victory, which they said would include the bombing of the University of Ibadan. For him, "The lack of analysis, the

failure to weigh the problem critically, the uncritical acceptance of all that the government or Ojukwu said” at the Nsukka citadel meant Biafra was on a dangerous and tragic path from the beginning (94). Whereas Saro-Wiwa expresses a deep distaste for Biafra (117), Achebe is sad that Biafra did not materialize. Saro-Wiwa predicted “a deserving baptism of fire” for Nsukka as he departed the town (94), and that was what it got from the federal troops. It would be fascinating to have Achebe and Saro-Wiwa react to each other were they alive today. Interestingly, their books do so despite the wide gap between their publication dates.

One of the most telling reviews of *There Was a Country* is by none other than Adichie. In “Things Left Unsaid,” she expresses her admiration of the book, and reiterates a few of the questions Achebe has about Nigeria. Aside from the question of whether “Nigeria was a nation at all” at independence, Adichie concludes that *There Was a Country* is an outpouring of Achebe’s disappointment in the failures of Nigeria and the demise of Biafra (1). Her assertion is legitimate, but the problem is that the memoir neither helps Nigeria to overcome its debacle nor the victims of the war to heal from the trauma of bloodshed. Perhaps, writing it was a healing experience for Achebe, but in the end the book is more of a blame game than an objective and fair assessment of ethnic solidarity, or a lack of it, in Nigeria. Of course, Achebe expresses in this text a sense of disillusionment that is equally representative of the mood of many Nigerians in the novels examined in this study. Yet, this account of events in the country from the man who wrote *Things Fall Apart* is a radical departure from his earliest preoccupation to decry the misrepresentation of the African peoples, Nigerians included, by Europeans (“Novelist” 3; “Role” 8). Had a Briton written a book akin to *There Was a Country*, how would the reaction have been different from Nigerian writers? One cannot help but wonder.

Nevertheless, it is right to agree with Adichie that “Achebe mourns Biafra” but he is terribly disappointed in Nigeria (“Things” 1). A chronological ordering of Achebe’s works indicates a frustration with the inability of Nigeria to transform itself into the kind of nation he desires. His earliest writings evidence this observation, and so does his final work in which the beloved author once again explains the history and past of *his* people, the Igbos, the ones he knows best. In the last chapter of his literary adventure, he stresses that aside from the defective structural problem of Nigeria, the country has failed woefully in the area of leadership. While Achebe’s partisanship may be somewhat disappointing from an impartial point of view, it produces a more complex analysis of the sociopolitical cataclysm in the post-independence period.

A critical point to observe is that Adichie cannot be read outside the idea of Biafra and Achebe. Boehmer rightly notes that “Adichie’s work to date is stamped with numerous filiative gestures toward” the canonical writer (“Achebe” 8). Arguably, more than Achebe’s representation of the war, Adichie’s fiction recalls the effects of the Biafran-Nigerian enmity in a powerful literary form. For Ugwu, Odenigbo, and the other characters that are the victims of the war in *Yellow Sun*, the call for a Biafran nation is just because it is an alternative ethos to Nigeria, a larger social context into which colonialism throws the Igbos at the end of *Things Fall Apart*. While Nigeria is a product of the white man’s imagination, Biafra is the legitimate cohesive habitat delightfully *imagined*, deliberately constructed, and determinedly pursued by the Igbo people in the text. It must be noted, however, that from the perspective of minority groups like Saro-Wiwa’s, Biafra would likely not be that cohesive. As a community, Biafra relocates the Igbos to the pastoral scenery where they strongly feel they originally belong. It is no surprise then that the fight to preserve Biafra is deeply rooted in the desire and longing for a

nation that respects the cultural heritage, customs, and tradition of the Igbo people. By the time this spirited struggle finally collapses in *Yellow Sun*, Nigeria still remains ambivalent and a puzzle to all its diverse ethnicities.

Moreover, the narrative of *Yellow Sun* survives today as an indictment of ethnic loyalty and animosity in post-independence Nigeria. This novel is a memory of the horror and abuse, which ridicules and disproves the notion of Nigeria as a cohesive space. From whatever perspective this text is read, it ultimately highlights the failure of ethnic chauvinism that is massively fed with the flesh and blood of innocent citizens trapped in the ambivalence of border sharing between Nigeria as an ethnically polarized government and the ethnonational “Others” within it. Despite *Yellow Sun* being a dramatic enactment of the trauma that surprisingly depicts life as normal with characters making love and betraying each other, with people laughing and crying, eating, starving, feeling strong and depressed at the same time, the novel is a protest against the violence inflicted on vulnerable Igbo people. Even though there has not been another war over Biafra, the negative impact of the internecine conflict dramatized in this novel still lingers on in Nigeria and its history. Also, a narrative such as the one offered by Ugwu preserves Biafra as a heritage in the consciousness of those who fight to sustain it in the novel. The battle over Biafra may not be physical today, but it is being repeatedly waged in the texts of Nigerian writers even as we speak. For sure, Abani and Atta allude to it, but they are certainly far from offering the disturbing account Adichie relates. As a young boy who escaped with his mother and siblings from the war, Abani has a close connection to the war (Abani and Aycock 1). This is not the same for Atta and Ali.

Finally, while the Nigerian-Biafran war is no longer a new theme in Nigerian literature, Adichie refreshes it, and she presents the most interesting account of the war so far in a literary form. The novel, however, complicates the perceptions of its readers by constructing the strife as the Biafran-Nigerian conflict instead of the Nigerian Civil War. This representation is neither wrong nor negative, but it inevitably exposes the dilemma of Nigeria as a federation of diverse ethnic groups. As far as using the appropriate name for the war is concerned, it depends on who speaks or writes about it. Nevertheless, casting herself as the future long predicted by her literary forebears, Adichie suggests a new way to read Nigeria through the conflict portrayed in her novel. The end result of that reading is fascinatingly revealing: the concept of Nigeria was a colonialist experiment to test whether its disparate elements could afford a peaceful co-existence, instead, *Half of a Yellow Sun* proves that postcolonial Nigeria is a space of broken dreams and perpetual conflicts. This is the verdict of Adichie's novel, and it will be interesting to find out in the next chapter if Richard Ali indeed evaluates this situation differently.

## CHAPTER SIX

### SYMPTOMS OF TRAUMA IN “THE AGE OF IRON”: (SE)CURING THE NATIONAL PSYCHE IN RICHARD ALI’S *CITY OF MEMORIES*

There is an ancient saying where I grew up that if a mad man were given a hoe, he would etch ridges in between his own legs. Although there is no scientific proof to buttress this local maxim, if one may call it so, the conventional wisdom implicit in it is invoked in a specific context to imply that even a deranged person—that is, someone who is considered incapable of reasoning soundly—will fight to protect what he/she thinks belongs to him/her. This saying is significant because it demonstrates human tendencies to justify and defend even the most destructive action to protect one’s personal space and belonging. Later in this chapter, I will explain the relevance of this brief observation to the versions of the bloodletting that have left Nigeria traumatized for over four decades. It might be immaterial at this juncture to reiterate that the Civil War “has inspired many novels” that have spoken mostly from the Igbo perspective, but this reminder is meant to underline the central place this subject occupies in the consciousness of Nigerian literature (Kwarteng 314). Since the Northerners and the ethnic groups that refused to secede with the East are often represented in the Igbo stories as the enemies and assailants of Biafra, there is a need to review the war from another angle at this point. Therefore, the objective of this chapter is to re-examine the bloodshed in Biafra from a Northern perspective, with a view to mediating the experiences of both sides before and during the war. Against this background, I will explore the manner in which Richard Ali’s *City of Memories* provides a response to Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun*.

Born in the early 1980s in Kano, the heart of Northern Nigeria, Ali is one of the up and coming contemporary Nigerian writers. In an effort to know the specific year he was born, I

contacted Ali through his private e-mail address, but I got no response to my curious inquiry. Unlike the rest of the novelists examined in this work, Ali is currently based in Nigeria, specifically Jos. Law is Ali's formal profession, but he also has a strong interest in writing fiction and poetry. He is a stern critic of the federal government, and he is well informed on the negative impact of ethno-religious conflicts in his homeland. Ali brings this knowledge to bear in his interview with Valentina A. Mmaka, arguing that religious and ethnic conflicts have defined Nigeria since the colonial period. The politicians are aware of how seriously the diverse groups take their differences and, they exploit this problem to "cover their corruption and their ineptitude" (Ali and Mmaka 1). Ali is worried that his compatriots have continuously failed to understand the antics of the political elite and reject the viruses of religions. He reveals that his experience during an ethno-religious riot in Jos in 2001 prompted him to write *City of Memories*. For Ali, there is a need to revisit the past, either mentally or physically, in order to understand the present. Adichie, too, shares this sentiment in her Author's Note to *Half of a Yellow Sun* (543). Interestingly, she and Ali remember the same period in Nigeria's history quite from different angles.

*City of Memories*, a novel with diverse trajectories, is Ali's maiden book. It is the story of two lovers caught up in the ethno-religious crisis in Jos and a more disturbing ongoing Civil War troubling the psyche of their country. But unlike Olanna and Odenigbo, Faruk and his lover, Rahila, have to survive a more dangerous relationship because of the political strife between their parents, Colonel Ibrahim Dibarama and Eunice Pam respectively. The plot of the novel revolves around the effort to keep Nigeria an indivisible country against the odds provided by ethnic/religious differences, corruption, and inexperience of the political establishment. At the

centre of my discussion in this chapter is a detailed examination of the trauma that Faruk's father still experiences after fighting against the Biafrans.

The character Ibrahim Dibarama suggests a response to Adichie's (and Achebe's) sympathetic stories about the collapse of Biafra. After all, Adichie argues in her 2009 Technology, Entertainment, Design (TED) talk that there is a danger in telling "a 'single story' about people and places over and over again" because such a narrative "can quickly become the definitive story of those places and of the people who live in them" (Adichie, "Danger;" Biddulph, "Editorial" 45). Her lecture highlights the potential of stories to construct or reify identities and stereotypes because of the way certain people/places are shown repeatedly in one or similar stories. Adichie's point is close to the fascinating remark of the indigenous Canadian writer, Thomas King that "Stories are wondrous things. And they are dangerous" (9). For King, a story can create a new perspective or change an existing one depending on the narrator and the way s/he relates it, and he believes that everybody, every action has a story (29). So far, the story of Biafra has been about the annihilation of a particular group by another one because this is the version that has been in circulation since the war began in 1967 and ended in 1970. In *You're Not a Country, Africa*, Pius Adesanmi is able to decipher why the story of Biafra from the Eastern perspective has gained more recognition and won sympathy over the years. He argues that in spite of the East not having "a singular history, religion, or culture," the "Igbo leaders and intellectuals have been able to forge an overarching discourse of identity rooted in a collective sense of persecution and victimhood" (50). This discourse of regionalized oppression has presented every other major ethnic group in Nigeria as annihilators of the Igbo people, and it "makes it difficult for the contemporary Igbo subject to envisage an identity devoid of emotions or permanent victimhood within" the same geopolitical or federal space (50).



Since the Igbo narrative fails to mention the reactions of the minority groups within its region, such as the cases in Ken Saro-Wiwa's *On a Darkling Plain: An Account of the Nigerian Civil War* (see also Adesanmi 50-52), and instead casts every non-Igbo Nigerian as an enemy through its repeated production and circulation of the discourse of victimization, there should be no surprise that a novel such as *Half of a Yellow Sun* has gained lots of attention outside Nigeria, and further cemented the image of the Northerner as hostile to Biafra. In his essay titled "On Miss Adichie's Sensibility," Ali is not pleased that the Northerners have been the target of the blame game in the country since 1966 because they have not been speaking about their experiences and perspectives of events in Nigeria. He affirms his commitment thus: "within my country, I speak for a part of the country that has largely not spoken for itself and against the rude assumptions consequent upon that incapacity to speak, I make a stand. Yes, damnit, it is related to the Civil War—the same thing Miss Adichie is playing around with" (1). With his knowledge of Nigeria's history, Ali insists he seeks to engage other parts of the country that have so far unfairly accused the North of causing marginalization and trouble in the federation. He contextualizes his work by adding that "Over the last two decades, longer for some, attempts have been made by many writers of southern extraction in their writings to foist the North {excluding the defacto West} with a guilt that it does not feel for that war or alternatively, for the intervening dictatorships" (1). He repudiates the attempts to impose guilt on Northern Nigeria by the people that do not belong there. Certainly, *Memories* is not as detailed in its description of the war as *Half of a Yellow Sun* is, but it offers a fresh opportunity to re-evaluate the claims over this conflict that has become a seminal subject in Nigerian literature and culture in general for about four decades. In the end, the novel successfully multiplies perspectives of Nigerian fiction on the Civil War and the Nigerian federation.

Essentially, *Memories* is the story of Faruk Dibarama, a privileged young Hausa man, who undergoes a risky adventure so he can know himself better, understand his country, and win the love of Rahila Pam, the woman he cherishes. Faruk's and Rahila's love story is caught up in the tragedy of ethno-religious crises into which Nigeria is plunged by politicians and the military figures, including the parents of the two lovers. Intertwined with the story of Faruk and Rahila are other stories that form a subtext of Ali's novel. In some ways, this feature complicates a clear and simple reading of *Memories*, inviting attention to the symbol of Ibrahim Dibarama, his cancer, trauma, and memory of the war. Keeping this observation in mind, Faruk's relationship with Rahila is overshadowed by a more central and important subject, which is incited by a possible national apocalypse. Yet, without providing a comprehensive account of the complicated Faruk-Rahila love story, my reading of this text, as well as the uncertainty it places on the same relationship that depicts the fight for Nigeria, is incomplete.

Faruk and Rahila are deeply in love, but their parents are political enemies. Rahila's mother, Eunice Pam, is particularly opposed to her daughter engaging in a relationship with Faruk. Ibrahim Dibarama, on the other hand, is open to his son courting Rahila, but he is well aware of the damage his enmity with Eunice can cause to it (20-23). A graduate "in Political Philosophy summa cum laude from Columbia University" in New York City, Eunice takes pride in her feminist ideology, and she passionately sells it as her strength to conquer patriarchal power in her country and her more traditional Northern region (27). During her studies, she acquired the ability to thoroughly organize people around a social or political cause. When offered a political appointment on her return home after "the Civil War had just ended," Eunice is poised to use her skills to successfully organize women on matters of national interest and commit to the struggle for the "emancipation of women" (29, 30). The novel does not indicate if she records any success

in this mission. Nevertheless, Eunice is a strong political figure and a force to reckon with in the North Central region, especially Jos. She is so popular that she launches the New Grassroots Party, a political platform through which she attempts to advance her ideas and mount a formidable opposition to the social and political systems she disavows for encouraging the domination of women by men. Unfortunately for Eunice, her misfortunes happen very quickly. First, her political party is heavily defeated by the incumbent GNPP, whose campaign coordinator is Ibrahim Dibarama, a retired colonel (32-33). Second, she divorces George Pam, her husband, “after the disastrous election” (78). With the collapse of the second republic resulting from a military coup shortly after the election, Eunice regains the spotlight, being appointed the Secretary of Education by the Military Governor of her state, while her opponents “from the second republic are starting long spells in prisons all over the country.” She has “no sympathy for them” (34). She justifies her attitude by claiming “politics is a game of power,” and that she is focused on discharging her duties well “in my new portfolio” in this “new military regime” (33).

Eunice and her nemesis, Ibrahim, remain active in politics for decades. As a more conservative figure, Ibrahim appears more personable and interested in the unity of Nigeria. He is also skeptical of the competence of politicians to hold the country together like the soldiers. This stance endears him to the students of the Polytechnic where he is invited to deliver a guest lecture on the Nigerian identity. This institution serves as a platform for Ibrahim to express his views about the country and politicians like Eunice. Perpetually traumatized by the death of his wife, Ummi al-Qassim, he chooses to withdraw to himself more often, and he makes less noise about his influence in the state. Throughout the novel, Ibrahim is haunted by both the tragedy of

his wife's passing and the death of his hero, Prime Minister Tafawa Balewa. He is also aware that he is the reason Eunice is fiercely opposed to the relationship between Faruk and Rahila.

In terms of organizing public actions, Rahila inherits great skills from her mother. She demonstrates her leadership traits when she incites the female residents in her hostel to protest against the lack of water in their university residence (34-37). With her new position as the "Secretary for Education" (33), Eunice prevents Rahila and her comrades from being locked up by the state's military administrator, although she scolds her daughter thereafter for leading her gang of students to abduct the university vice-chancellor during their demonstration (24-26). Unlike her mother, Rahila is not interested in instigating ethnic or religious groups against each other for personal gain. Her love for Faruk is real, but it is inhibited by the bitter rivalry between her mother and Ibrahim. Forced by her mother to break up with the man she loves, Rahila increasingly grows estranged and frustrated with Eunice. Eunice insists that, as a Christian, Rahila cannot marry Faruk because he is a Muslim. Her daughter knows that this is a flimsy excuse blanketed by a fiercer and malicious political animosity between her mother and Ibrahim (78, 99). On a couple of occasions, both women engage each other in acrimonies over the influence a mother should have on a daughter who just wants to be with the man she loves dearly and unconditionally.

Eventually, Faruk is forced to walk away from Rahila for beating her brother, Musa Pam, who colludes with Eunice to end the relationship (37-38). One night, Musa and his friends find Faruk in a bar, and provoke him (76). He "refused to leave, and had even smiled when Musa emptied a glass of Vodka on his back" (77). Faruk leaves the bar in annoyance, but Musa continues looking for him. Musa is so hell-bent on hurting his sister's lover that he vows to

reward a man with “Five thousand dollars” to find and kill him. Aware of this plan, Faruk waylays Musa “down the street,” and assaults him (77). Long after breaking up with Faruk, Rahila discovers more of her mother’s atrocities, especially her role in a religious crisis that leaves several people dead in its wake. She feels ashamed of and disappointed in her mother for going too far. At this point, she finds solace in her father whose part in the novel is relatively muted. Rahila chooses to heal herself by seeking refuge at St. Emmanuel’s College, an isolated Bible school built in a serene outskirt of the North Central. Broken by the arrest of and a possible jail term for her mother, Rahila finds a lifting companionship in Funmi, a new friend she meets toward the end of the novel. But she rediscovers happiness with the surprise appearance of Faruk at the college to take her home. With all the previous experiences behind her, she does not hesitate to renew her love for Faruk.

The novel’s central protagonist, Faruk, feels that life is defined by a series of events, most of which are unknown to him. His main trouble is his inability to sustain his relationship with Rahila, the only woman he truly loves. Faruk discusses “his danger-fraught love for Rahila” (12) with Hussena Bukar, “his mother’s closest friend until she died” (11-12). Hussena relates all that Faruk tells her regarding Rahila to his mother’s story. She gives “him his mother’s diaries just after her he had told her about his troubles” (13), and encourages him to learn about the past in order to understand the present. After he reluctantly resolves to let go of the love of his life, Faruk gets a six-month teaching offer at the Federal Government College in Bolewa, and this provides him an opportunity to learn about his roots, especially the life of his mother. Granted permission by his father, who finds it difficult to talk about his wife to his son, Faruk travels to Bolewa to meet with his mother’s relatives. Before beginning his mission fully, he resumes his teaching job, and he meets a young woman, Maryam Bazza, whose affection Faruk cannot

reciprocate because Rahila continues to preoccupy his mind. His presence in Bolewa, including his meeting with Maryam's father, sets him up for a visit to his uncle, the Imam of the town. Faruk discovers that he belongs to the royal family of Bolewa, and learns about his mother's role in the unspeakable acts of killings and revenge in Bolewa, which everyone would rather not remember or discuss (148). She was a victim of a bitter fight between two young men, Ahmed Anwar and Usman Waziri, who were in love with her at the same time. Banished from Bolewa, both men returned afterwards, and they initiated a disastrous religious conflict that shook the town to its foundations. As a way of ridding Bolewa of its memories of this trouble, Ummi al-Qassim was married off to Ibrahim. Through this crisis and his mother's experience, Faruk develops a better understanding of himself and his country, locating within the entire paradigm of love and hate, acceptance and rejection, including provocation and appeasement, the memories that continue to shape the behavioral patterns of Nigeria. Even in Bolewa, Faruk is not safe because Eunice hires two assassins to kill him so she can break down her opponent, Ibrahim, and finally stop worrying about the possibility of her daughter reuniting with his son. This plot fails, and the hired killers are captured by the security guards working for Faruk's uncle. Faruk returns to Jos safe, putting behind him the bitter taste of the past, and he reclaims the love of his life in the process.

The aspect of the novel that I am most interested in is hidden in the character of Ibrahim, and fleshing it out requires a more careful reading of the text. The crises that overwhelm Ibrahim and his country are more serious than the love story included in *Memories*. Love is a fantastic feeling. It enhances peace and unity among the people who share and reciprocate it. Ironically, Ali's attempt to celebrate the complicated love between Faruk and Rahila coincidentally exposes the signs that describe Nigeria as a disrupted space. In his discussion of *Half of a Yellow Sun*,

John Marx describes the Nigerian-Biafran hostility and the Igbos' secession as the indicators of Nigeria as a failed-state. By alluding to the same war and the other crises in the country, *Memories* could also fit into the failed-state fiction model into which Marx places Adichie's novel. To categorize Nigeria as a failed-state or the novels as failed-state texts is beyond the scope of this study. This disclaimer does not, however, refute my position that the texts examined in this work are commentaries on the political actions of the Nigerian leaders and people, but the failed-state characterization and inference must wait to be picked up in another project for which I am longing. That being said, in spite of the attempts to keep valued relationships, the crises in *Memories* are a culmination of the Age of Iron whose symptoms are symbolized by the grief of Ibrahim, the health and life of his wife, including the Civil War and the ethno-religious unrest in Jos. From this point forward, my discussion will shift attention from the riots and killings in Jos and the love story of Rahila and Faruk. Nevertheless, these characters remain central to my argument.

My use of the phrase "Age of Iron" is informed by the parable with which the ancient Greek poet and writer Hesiod illustrates his philosophy of time. Ali carefully re-presents the history of Nigeria with allegorical techniques that transcend the understanding of those who are not familiar with Hesiod's principles of time. In *Works and Days*, Hesiod describes the features of different ages—Silver, Stone, and Iron. The Age of Iron, he proposes, is a total ruin. Hesiod predicts that in this age there will be "terrible pain and vexation" (28). It is an age that will be defined by civil disobedience, hate, war, injustice, diseases, vice, violence, evil, shame, and nemesis (28-29). Everything will collapse, and humanity will not be defended "against evil" (29). In a nutshell, the Age of Iron will condemn everything to destruction. This is Ibrahim's fear for Nigeria. His wife's illness before her death symbolizes the possible extinction of Nigeria as a

country because its citizens are engaged in a bitter war against each other. Much like the terminal cancer Mrs. Curren suffers from in *Age of Iron*, the scintillating novel by the South African writer J. M. Coetzee, Umami al-Qassim's cancer has a parallel to Hesiod's apocalyptic Age of Iron when everything will plunge into chaos. In Coetzee's text, Mrs. Curren is a privileged middle-class Afrikaner who is worried about the racial segregation laws that encourage the oppression of the black population by the white minority in South Africa. Her terminal breast cancer symbolizes the gradual death of South Africa. Umami al-Qassim may not be as sophisticated and in control of the events in Ali's novel as Mrs. Curren is in Coetzee's, but her affliction equally embodies the signs of the fate of time in Hesiod's parable. Although Hesiod does not suggest the future of the Age of Iron after it will have been destroyed by Zeus in his rage, Ibrahim is poised to prevent his troubled country from dying or fulfilling this prophecy of doom. Despite his relentless and, sometimes, overzealous struggle, Ibrahim is overwhelmed and traumatized by the happenings that he feels are the precursors of the destruction of his homeland. Perhaps, it is just a matter of time before his fear is realized.

More importantly, suggested in Ali's account of the Nigerian crisis that culminated in the Civil War is the idea that the Northerners, not the Easterners, are the people traumatized by the battle to keep the country together. Ibrahim fought in the war, and he justifies his role through the dream of his hero, Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa. Ibrahim assesses Nigeria's problem as the consequence of the death of the Prime Minister, telling his friend Zakari that "Balewa was a believer in the country. He saw the northern region as a company of complementary people who could come together for mutual benefit. And it was the same way he saw Nigeria. Of all the Northern leaders, he was the most unafraid of the Southerners" (51). He adds that "Balewa saw farther than the Northern region, he saw Nigeria. Let's say I was affected by his optimism; my



sense of the country was rooted in his persuasiveness” (51). For Ibrahim, Balewa embodies a utopia and a national leader capable of uniting all the different ethnic groups. Embellished in his adoration of this fallen hero, however, is a reiteration of the Northern agenda, which the other ethnic groups fear threatens the rest of the country. First, Balewa saw Nigeria the way he saw the North, ignoring the fact that the country is a confederation of peoples with diverse leadership systems prior to the amalgamation. Ibrahim’s account insinuates that Balewa was intent on governing all Nigerians as if they were Northerners. A different way to claim he was “unafraid of the Southerners” is to say that he was insensitive to the ideas and visions of the non-Northerners on how to lead the country. He might know best and be impressive in his governing from the perspective of Ibrahim, but the Prime Minister’s leadership style, as described above, could also be interpreted as the crystallization of the North-South tension into which the country was born.

On his part, Ibrahim ignores this tension, but he is quick to blame the people responsible for the first coup. He argues that the cause of Balewa’s death was that “the other regional leaders, especially Awolowo, refused to see the country in big picture terms” (51). Ibrahim goes further, praising his role model with a view to legitimizing the Prime Minister’s attitude toward political opposition (52). The other regional leaders, according to this view, were not interested in the singular Nigerian entity that Balewa saw. Each of them was more interested in running the affairs of the country rather than unite it around a common purpose and policy privileged by the Northern leader. Ibrahim claims that Balewa was killed in the first coup because “he had the strength of mind to run a country,” unlike his political adversaries, especially Awolowo and “another supreme egotist in Enugu seeking a place in history with a capital H” (52). The “supreme egotist” in Ibrahim’s version is elusive, but this confusion is left to the narrator to

clarify. Ibrahim recalls the first killings in the North after the coup, blaming them on Ironsi for lacking the guts and authority to ensure safety and protection of the victims, who were mostly Igbos. His reaction to the killing of the Igbo people in Kano, for instance, is markedly different from Odenigbo's in the previous chapter. While Odenigbo accuses Gowon of doing nothing to stop the pogrom, Ibrahim directs blame at Ironsi, the Igbo military head of state at the time.

Linking the Nigerian crisis to the ailment suffered by his wife, Ibrahim admits that his country is on the verge of death. He says that his wife “suffers from a schizoaffective condition: that’s what the doctors say. She is dying from losing her mind, her grip on reality” (52). He confesses to his friend later that his fear transcends the disease of his wife; the state of his country worries him to his bone marrow, and he fears the goal of his role model will be jeopardized eventually. The dream of Balewa was to firmly establish a healthy Nigeria, but after his demise, the country is now afflicted by a sickness Ibrahim diagnoses as “a crisis of the national spirit” that bears a resemblance to the affliction suffered by Umme al-Qasim;

Ibrahim Dibarama explained the “crisis of the national spirit” in detail—he felt it was a sort of large-scale social trauma fostered by people who refused to see the large picture. He thought the Civil War had battered the country’s psyche, and the country was showing symptoms of trauma, just like his wife: He felt that, just as he was losing his wife, the country was on the brink of being lost if something proactive was not done. (53)

This is the point where he attempts to justify the war. He believes strongly in the vision of Balewa and in the idea that ethnic politics is the bane of Nigeria’s cohesion. He wants the united Nigeria envisioned by his role model. He sees the country disintegrating, and he joins the violent

struggle to keep it as one political entity. Ibrahim ferociously proves his loyalty to the existence of this country, even in his unusual rivalry with Eunice and during a public lecture he delivers to the student group and their invited guests, informing them that “I have come here to enlist you [. . .] into the Cohesion Corps. Its credo is based on love of country and mutual respect. It is important that each of you here, most of you born here in the North Central, learn that compromise is necessary in constructing a Nigerian identity and we trust exclude indices that will *ab initio* render our harmony impossible” (57-58). This excerpt from Ibrahim’s speech highlights his determination to sustain the spirit of his country, and he hopes his message resonates with the students so much so that they also will enlist in the army whose task is to keep Nigeria one at all costs.

One of the inconsistencies in Colonel Dibarama’s mission is his belief that force should be used against dissidents, including innocent people from the “other” group when necessary. The killings of the Igbos in the North, for which he previously blames Ironsi, appear to be justifiable to him, as the narrator later calls them the “police action” during which Ibrahim took a picture in his army uniform (57). This term is nothing but a euphemism aimed at watering down the pogrom in which Ibrahim possibly participated in reaction to the death of his fellow Northerner and hero. Even Ibrahim is aware of the problem of ethnicity in his country that keeps struggling to define its core. The war against the Igbos is, in some way, rationalized as retaliation against the assassination of the Prime Minister by Eastern elements in the army, but Ibrahim downplays this insinuation in *Memories*. One of his comrades, Hassan Abba, another Northern veteran of the Civil War, claims that the bloodshed had to happen in order to hold the country together. Ibrahim entered and exited the war with grief, but his friend reminds him of the objective of the fight: “We are soldiers and we were in a war, we did what we could do with the

devil on our heels. We did it for the right cause. And, in wars, things happen. You think it would have been better to sit at home and let the secession happen? Then what next, who next would have seceded? The country, Ibrahim! We were at war to keep the country one. And we damn did the best we could” (60). The North’s version of the killings detailed in *Half of a Yellow Sun* is explicitly stated in Hassan’s account and scolding of Ibrahim for failing to understand the point of the war. After all, he embodies the values of Balewa, and his faithfulness to his late mentor demands he must prevent the country from falling apart. According to Hassan, the war was justifiable as long as it was for the good of Nigeria, but what remains questionable, in my reading of this text, is the morality of killing people in order to force them to stay in a fractured federation that we have seen in all the novels analyzed in this study. Here is a sharp contrast between the previous chapter and this one: to Odenigbo and his peers, the coup that killed the Prime Minister Balewa and mostly the Hausa members of the cabinet was just, but to Hassan and Ibrahim, it was not. To Odenigbo and his group of friends, the war fought against Biafra was not legitimate, but to Hassan, in particular, it was.

If *Half of a Yellow Sun* is at loggerheads with *Memories* on how best to justify the failure of the Nigerian federation to prevent internal bloodshed, there is another problem of who is most eligible to recount the crisis in order to show which party was wronged. Based on the ethnic affiliations of the authors of these texts, it is not surprising that their accounts seek attention to the versions of defeat and victory. If the war to justify secession is waged at the site of the ethnic in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, *Memories* suggests that what gives legitimacy to the basis of conquest is what happens at the sites of the local and the personal, the local being the immediate context whose interest the fighter is poised to protect, and the personal being an emotional attachment to the cause of a struggle. Context in this case is the community to which the fighters pledge

allegiance. So, the mad man making ridges in between his legs may have a good reason for doing so if “good” means serving and protecting one’s individualistic agenda by all means necessary. *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Memories* debate each other on the ways to justify or condemn the Nigerian-Biafran strife from two rival spaces in which both cannot be allies at once. In offering a counterpoint to the stories of dehumanization in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, *Memories* refuses to explicitly condemn the war or portray the federal soldiers fighting against Biafra as aggressors. Adichie mourns Biafra, but Ali mourns Balewa and the North-dominated first republic lost to a bloody military take-over.

For Ibrahim and his comrades, the killing of Balewa in the coup was a gross violation of the sacred trust the Hausa-Fulani people had in one Nigeria. Faruk’s uncle, the Emir of Bolewa, is instrumental to the protagonist’s success at understanding the story of his mother. During his interaction with Faruk, the Emir shares Ibrahim’s grief that the “killing of Sir Tafawa Balewa left a difficult void to come to terms with” (190). He believes that the incident took the Northerners by surprise and traumatized them, especially Ibrahim, who feels Balewa is irreplaceable. In his own recounting, the Emir reveals the true intention of Ibrahim and his friends in Biafra:

Your father and many of these soldiers, the officers especially, did not go into the Civil War for the sake of keeping the country together, or because the Premiers had been killed. No it was the killing of their radical hero, Tafawa Balewa, which gingered them up against the Igbo. To them, Balewa had done nothing wrong except to believe in Nigeria. The Igbo people had refused to denounce Nzeogwu and his band of criminals, had in fact been very publicly celebratory of Tafawa Balewa’s gruesome assassination. Your father and many others were only too

glad to go to war—to teach a lesson to the people who had murdered their hero.  
(190)

The outcome of that lesson is the story of displacement and devastation in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Adichie’s novel does not take seriously the psychological effect of the deaths of Tafawa Balewa and the Northern people assassinated with him. On the contrary, the narrator recalls the cheer with which Auntie Ifeka, one of Adichie’s characters, makes fun of the last moment of Ahmadu Bello, Premier of the Northern Region and the symbol of Northern politics, before he was killed: “Our people say that the chorus sounds like *mme-mme-mme*, the bleating of a goat [. . .]. They say the Sardauna sounded like that when he was begging them not to kill him. When the soldiers fired a mortar into his house, he crouched behind his wives and bleated, ‘*Mme-mme-mme*, please don’t kill me, *mme-mme-mme!*’” (*Yellow Sun* 164). No question, this is a celebratory reaction to the gruesome murder of Bello by the coup masterminds.

In fact, Ali takes issues with Adichie on this description, which he calls “simile.” In “Sensibility,” Ali disapproves of the way Adichie compares the cry of the Sardauna to the sound of a goat, arguing that “Miss Adichie has described the death of Sardauna Bello, the son of a sultan and an almost mythic leader of a still conservative northern Nigeria, describing his murder by a man he knew personally and trusted, by a man who had eaten at his table, repeating that that same Sardauna died bleating like a goat in a Rex Lawson song” (1). For Ali, even though Adichie may claim literature gives the writer the right to say anything s/he chooses, she fails to consider and condemn the horror of the Sardauna’s death in the first coup, leaving a Northern Nigerian reader like Ali feeling that she is insensitive to the trauma that permeated the region after its premier was killed in a coup by the people he trusted.

Ifeka reads this incident differently, and she particularly has fun with the premier begging for his life because she sees his death as the only way to get rid of “an evil man” who “hated us [. . .]. Hated everybody,” and “did not allow our children to go to school” (*Yellow Sun* 164). In taking Adichie to task personally, Ali reveals that he interprets this kind of reaction as a non-Northerner’s support for the men who killed the prime minister and changed the history of the federation in 1966:

The same men who killed duly elected Nigerian politicians. The same men who murdered Colonel Pam. THEY opened the sluices! Yet, Miss Adichie has described the death of an elected premier of a region comprising at least half of Nigeria’s 1966 population with the distasteful, odious simile she has used. In denigrating the Sardauna, she elevates his murderer: in rejecting teething politics, she accepts shinbone dictatorship. It is as simple and horrific as that. My grandfather and the grandfathers of my friends voted for that man, I took my degree in the university he built, I and many young people in this country revere him for what he set out to achieve and what he did achieve – now, is Miss Adichie’s description not baiting? What else is it? (1)

This is exactly how Ibrahim feels. He is not impressed by this kind of mockery because there is something more serious in what he thinks befell the North. His melancholy mood and Ifeka’s celebration describe the extent of bitter inter-ethnic crises in Nigeria. For both characters, there is a reaction captured by a good feeling of “I am happy when we attack them, but I am sad when they kill one of our own.” This is the attitude of the deranged man fighting to guard the ridges he makes with a hoe given to him by a benefactor.

What is even more interesting in the discussion among the characters is the Emir interpreting the slaying of the Prime Minister as an invitation to the North to engage in a war that Ojukwu made to happen by his declaration of Biafran autonomy. As the Emir later summarizes his version, “You cannot understand the Civil War without understanding the effect of the murder of Sir Tafawa Balewa” (190). In most novels that portray this incident in the history of Nigeria, the effect to which Faruk’s uncle alludes is given no recognition because the singular objective of such works is to repeatedly call attention to the story of genocide in Biafra. None of these texts, some of which are already mentioned in the previous chapter, is critical of the murders as much as they are of the war per se.

Unable to come to terms with the “amount of hate shown to the murdered Prime Minister’s abused and mutilated body,” Ibrahim reads the first coup as “ethnic treachery” (199). He explains that an investigation into the mutiny revealed something shocking. “The skewed incidence of military and political casualties,” he says, “began to make horrible sense to the northern officers and men” (200). He alleges that certainly “the coup had been targeted at their home Region. The coup failed in Lagos and soon after, Nzeogwu, ironically with only Kaduna in his control, was talked into surrendering.” Ibrahim laments that the date of the coup was “a day of betrayal, a day when ethnic hate came to educate the country’s idealists—who suddenly found to their shame and disgrace that they had been stupidly, fatally, naive” for trusting the other ethnic groups, especially the one that produced most of the coup plotters (200). He is upset that the idea of a united Nigeria had already collapsed on the day of this unspeakable act. He believes that “if there had been more southerners sympathetic to Balewa’s pan-Nigerian vision, if the politicians had been less jingoist, if the southern soldiers had been more understanding and less inciting, if Ironsi had been smarter, if . . . so many ifs—Nigeria could still have been saved”



(200-01). Ibrahim grieves over the death of Balewa, which for him is synonymous with the loss of Nigeria as a result of ethnic strife within the polity. He wishes he could obliterate the date from the country's history because it was the "day that national schisms started setting themselves in stone" (201). He is conscious of his struggle to fulfil the idealistic dream of his hero, but he is also haunted by the fact that Nigeria was lost after the first coup (201). The war and every other crisis that has followed the coup are signs of depression.

Like *Half of a Yellow Sun*, *Memories* depicts the Civil War as an eruption of ethnic animosity. The war is waged in both novels at the sites of the local and personal. If the scene of this fighting is more distant from the North or Lagos, the prelude to it is not. *Half of a Yellow Sun* suggests that the Civil War happened because of the hatred of the Igbos by the rest of Nigeria. *Memories*, in contrast, implies that Adichie ignores the prelude, which Ibrahim regards as traumatic for the Northern people who lost prominent figures in "the Igbo coup in 1966" (*Memories* 95). For Ibrahim, the physical war took place in Biafra, but the psychological one continues to rage in the North, where it was first felt. Besides, *Memories* troubles *Half of a Yellow Sun*'s depiction of Igbos as the only casualties of the war, for Ibrahim is saddened that after "three years of January 15<sup>th</sup> 1966, the core of the northern officer corps was lost on battlefields scattered like death magnets across the seceded South-eastern Nigeria" (201). By feeling this way, Ibrahim rejects the notion that the Biafran fighters were weak and ill-equipped. Otherwise, the North would not lose the core of its army officers.

Having witnessed several crises unfold, Ibrahim explains the aspects that his son and his friends are unable to understand in their zeal for the country. Nigeria is a dystopia because it lacks an internal core, and it is not a unified polity. To lay claim to one Nigeria implies that

every Nigerian thinks of the country the same way. History teaches Ibrahim that the dream of the first generation of post-independence Nigeria was short-lived, if it ever materialized at all. Even, Rahila's father reasons the same way, and sums up his disappointment when he tells his daughter that "Dystopias are created when societies lack mechanisms of balance within them. And when there is no mechanism of balance, nobody can predict how each antagonistic segment of such society will behave." George believes that "the mechanism of balance" was lost as a result of the death of Ahmadu Bello (95). Implied in George's conversation here is the rapidity with which a new country still romanticizing the possibility of a utopia turned dystopic, disintegrated, and slumped to orgies of violence. He and Ibrahim find people to hold responsible for the break-up, and none of them is a Northerner as far as he is concerned.

Unlike the rest of the novels in this study, *Memories* refuses to detail the negative aspects of military government in Nigeria. There is no gainsaying the Civil War happens on the watch of the military, but the text breaks ranks with the other works, especially *Graceland*, *Waiting for an Angel*, and *Everything Good Will Come* in its appraisal of military regimes. Ibrahim is endowed with the privilege of educating the people on the need to keep soldiers in power. Having served in the Nigerian Army, he feels the cure to the country's problems is making sure there is an additional force to monitor its politics. In a dialogue with Ibrahim, the leader of the students' union at the Polytechnic claims that he knows the ex-colonel is "aware of the danger of politics and the necessity to have a third force outside politics to keep politicians in line" because "the cohesion of this country is so slight a thing to be left to politicians" (44). Indeed, Ibrahim is skeptical of politicians, and he believes they are corrupt, divisive, and selfish (84). He finds an ally in *Half of a Yellow Sun*'s Ugwu who feels that:

[Nigerian] politicians were not like normal people, they were *politicians*. He read about them in the *Renaissance* and *Daily Times*—they paid thugs to beat opponents, they bought land and houses with government money, they imported fleets of long American cars, they paid women to stuff their blouses with false votes and pretend to be pregnant. Whenever he drained a pot of boiled beans, he thought of the slimy sink as a *politician*. (160)

In fact, Adichie’s narrator confirms that Olanna’s father is one of those politicians through an incident that involves her mother and an elderly man working in their house. Olanna’s mother accuses this man of stealing not “more than four cups of rice” in the house. A bemused Olanna finds the “man kneeling in front of her mother with his hands raised high, palms upward in supplication” (274). This sight infuriates Olanna, and she wonders why no one punishes the corrupt elite, noting that her “father and his politician friends steal money with their contracts, but nobody makes them kneel to beg for forgiveness. And they build houses with their stolen money and rent them out to people like this man and charge inflated rates that make it impossible to buy food” (276). Ibrahim is aware of the characteristics Ugwu and Olanna spell out in their description of the politicians, and these traits compel him to agree with his friend, Zakari, that Nigerian political figures are “a confederacy of the corrupt and the inept” (*Memories* 51). This view does not extend to Balewa and the Northern politicians killed in the first republic because, for Ibrahim and his interlocutor, those were in fact the first and last best of the country’s political elites. The worst ones were spared by the military uprising, and they will stop at nothing to break up the country now.

Indeed, the hostility between Ibrahim and Eunice is a strong indication of the extent to which the former is opposed to the intention of the politicians to undermine Nigeria's unity. In a clear demonstration of his attempt to bind the country together by the force he privileges, Ibrahim confronts a divisive Eunice, warning her that he is committed to fighting her daily to ensure she does not "break up the country" because "It is our fate that it is so; it is Written" (23). He has taken this fight to Biafra already, and returned with memories of the bloodshed. His threat to his current antagonist is not empty because we have seen what he is capable of doing. The other characters, including the Federal Police Commissioner and the Military Governor, who reason like Ibrahim, consider Eunice too dangerous for the unity of Nigeria. In the end, these three men collude to arrest her for inciting a violent ethno-religious crisis.

Like his father, Faruk wishes for a cohesive country. This dream, as well as the dead one his father still romanticizes, is perhaps an effort to express a political view. The discourse that Faruk encourages is an attempt to educate Nigerians about the need to dismantle the mechanisms of ethnic differences. He and his lover are friends to people from different ethnic groups. For instance, Funmi, a Yoruba woman, and Rahila, a Northerner, get on so well that their relationship seems to symbolize what their country could look like. The same thing is true of Nnmadi, an Igbo man, and Faruk. Even the "Federal Commissioner of Police Patrick Chukwuma [. . . ], a tall, dark-skinned Igbo officer," collaborates with Ibrahim to contain the ethno-religious crisis in the North-Central region (208). These characters are aware of the significance of a sense of unity in Nigeria. For example, Funmi tells Rahila that she is determined to fight for the stability of Nigeria even after the country has already broken down a couple of times. "The North Central State," she says, "is a mini-Nigeria and I believe that if we let it fragment it will only be the beginning of the dismantling of Nigeria." Funmi is conscious of how much her

country is fiercely divided along ethnic and religious lines. She further underscores this awareness when she declares “I am fighting against the things that will split this country, the fractionizing tendency, evident in even the little things we take for granted” (277).

Faruk subscribes to this idea in his imagination of his future with Rahila, thinking that together with his lover “he would stand as a dare to a new society, a new Nigeria, a new way of thinking beyond the faction” (237). No question, this is a progressive patriotism that embodies a fervent pan-Nigerian spirit at this time of crisis in the North-Central region, but the other novels suggest this is a future that was already lost in the past because the country’s problems are now insurmountable. Also, the challenge with Faruk’s feeling is that the construction of the North-Central region as a mini-Nigeria by a South-Westerner is not a true representation of the attitude of Nigerians located outside that area.

Finally, in its representation of post-independence complexities in the country, *Memories* offers its own version of the idea of Nigeria. In spite of its vague glide toward a sense of pan-Nigerianism, Ali’s text, like *Half of a Yellow Sun*, privileges ethnic actors that represent a certain group harboring animosity toward another one. The irony of the novel is that it describes the protracted season of killings in Biafra as a battle to keep Nigeria intact. The federation, the war suggests, is already broken, and it has failed to manage the grievances of its disparate elements. Ali assigns the responsibility of managing the country to Ibrahim, and the ex-soldier relishes this opportunity to explain to his audiences the double tragedy that has befallen Nigeria: first the sudden overthrow of the first republic, and second the battle to recapture a breakaway republic through bombings and bullets. Both incidents have left in their wake fiercer ethnic animosity and a tragic leadership style. In the end, what Ali offers to readers is a rare rebuttal—one that we

hardly see in Nigerian literary productions—to the pro-Biafra narrative that generally portrays the Igbos as victims of hate by the other ethnic groups in the country. As tiny as the voice of his text may appear on the long list of Nigerian novels, Ali has kept open the debate on the contested history of Nigeria, thereby motivating readers to reconsider their general perception of the North, and to look elsewhere in their investigation of the sources of wild distrust in the federation.

Whether or not *Memories* will be inducted into the country's hall of canonical texts is a question authors and other experts of Nigerian literature will answer, but this novel has certainly extended the scope of contemporary Nigerian fiction.

## CONCLUSION

### **“THE CENTRE CANNOT HOLD”: REGIONALIZED NARRATIVIZATION IN THE CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN NOVEL**

I noted in the Introduction that third generation fiction from Nigeria mourns the non-manifestation of the nationalist agenda. I also argued that the contemporary writers I selected are disappointed by the series of political, cultural, and social sabotages from which their country has not been able to recover since they were born. With a view to explaining Nigeria’s current state through the five representative novels and my secondary sources, I have so far constructed my discussion around the sense of disillusionment that Abani, Habila, Atta, Adichie, and Ali convey in their timely narratives. The anxieties, frustrations, and disappointment that these novelists represent intensely capture the overall attitudes and experiences of the Nigerian people. Marking their point of departure from the recurrent themes in the older novels, these texts redefine the postcolonial identity of Nigeria, and draw greater attention to the collapse of the nationalist dream. Nevertheless, this conclusion contends that after imaginatively (re)constructing the negative corollaries of Nigeria’s postcolonial condition and implicitly seeking a desirable alternative, the narratives remain open, and transcend the present, thereby suggesting that the debate about the country is ongoing.

To underscore this discussion, since the publication of my primary texts, the social, political, and economic conditions in Nigeria have become even more disheartening. The post-military era has witnessed a series of violent attacks on ordinary people. Prominent among the current problems in the country is the menace of Boko-Haram, a radical sect whose name implies “western education is sin” in English (Adibe 29-31; Nwabueze and Ekwughe 76; Loimeier 138). Members of this Northern-based group have launched a series of “bomb attacks” on people in

the region (Chiluwa and Adegoke 83). There have also been cases of Niger-Delta militants in the oil producing areas attacking, kidnapping, and killing government agents, foreign oil workers, and other individuals (Yang 6; Omitola 5-6). Again, these incidents indicate that the crises in Nigeria are far from over. This claim implies that there is therefore the need for redemption, a fresh independence for the Nigerian nation-state. This independence cannot be won by guns and ethno-religious or ethno-national wars, but by a genuine change of mentality and cultivation of positive attitudes heavily guarded by honesty, unity, transparency, and patriotism. A fresher Nigeria must have a coherent and distinct character as both a narrative presence and a political entity. Better still, all the different groups must, through their interactions with each other, attest to tolerance and harmony rather than construct the country's politics along ethnic lines. Clearly, these five novels do not narrativize a nation-state in which the aforementioned qualities are represented.

Most importantly, my aim has been to argue that a deep sense of disappointment and the lack of these desirable features in the polity inform the novelists' critiques of post-independence Nigeria. In a bid to seek an alternative, each narrative unconsciously ends up constructing a Nigerian entity that personifies a dystopic political formation whose "political history reflects a deep search for" a coherent nation-state (Nwakanma 2). It is important to note early that the sole exception to this point is *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Ugwu and the other main figures in the text long for, see, and live in Biafra before it ceases to exist. Nigeria purportedly never belonged to them; Biafra is their home and heritage. Essentially, Abani, Habila, Atta, Adichie, and Ali assume that they have written national texts, but the regional focus of their narratives suggests otherwise. These novels thus would more appropriately be considered part of a federal literature. Whereas Ali attempts to construct a cohesive Nigeria in the North-Central, the other novelists locate that



desired entity elsewhere, precisely the places with which they are familiar. In *Graceland*, *Waiting for an Angel*, and *Everything Good Will Come*, Lagos is Nigeria's melting pot, but not so in Ali's novel. There is nothing wrong with these authors' choices of settings, especially in view of the fact that Nigeria is not homogeneous. To underscore the country's diversity, the authors suggest different versions of Nigeria or what it means to be Nigerian at different times and in different places. This observation is a little more complicated regarding *Half of Yellow Sun*, as reflected in my analysis of the book in Chapter Four. Altogether, these novels engage each other on where and how best to meet Nigeria. This interesting conversation among the texts is a tribute to the country's diversity.

To some extent, *Half of a Yellow Sun* subscribes to ethnic solidarity in its discourse on Nigeria. There is no denying that the novel is a fictionalization of a troubled, but significant, past in post-independence Nigeria. Adichie suggests that readers of her novel should remember how the federal government clamped down on its helpless victims in the Eastern parts of the country. In this sense, the conflict in the novel is not Nigeria's war; it is an Igbo war fought against its greatest enemy, Nigeria. The reason for the perspective that Adichie privileges is possibly that the war is told by a character identified as Biafran rather than Nigerian. Olanna watches Ugwu grow under her tutelage and the revolutionary consciousness her husband embodies. Adichie gives Ugwu a story to possess so that we can recall and be conscious of the longing for an Igbo nation at a particular point in history. After interacting with Ugwu, it appears his narrative is a memory Adichie ingeniously struggles to depersonalize.

Compared to *Half of a Yellow Sun*, there seems to be a more grounded Nigeria in *Waiting for an Angel* because Habila's narration is more direct and inclusive. There are two reasons that

can possibly explain this style. First, Habila is a journalist and writer. Prior to leaving Nigeria, he had travelled to different parts of the country as a reporter and had an acute awareness of the inhumane practices of military dictators. Habila has stated that he wrote *Waiting for an Angel* for “people like me, young, frustrated, patriotic, and desirous of change. All of us were victims in those years. I wanted to point out especially the mental agony, the psychological flagellation all of us experienced under the military” (Habila and Page 1). His objective is to describe the general situation of Nigerians, irrespective of their ethnicity, during the military years. Therefore, it is understandable why Habila strives to portray one singular political space whose setting is Lagos. Atta is close to Habila in her configuration of Nigeria as a congenial entity. In *Everything Good Will Come*, she, too, describes a Nigeria suffering under brutal military regimes because, for her, despotism is a heavier burden on the citizens than the lack of ethnic solidarity. Abani’s *Graceland* tends to follow the trajectories of *Waiting for an Angel* and *Everything Good Will Come*, but unlike both of those novels and *Half of a Yellow Sun*, it epitomizes a rejection of Nigeria’s existence, and represents the country as a space riddled with decay, conflict, and social transgressions. This point does not mean that Abani’s work tilts toward ethnic solidarity as much as *Half of a Yellow Sun* does. Essentially, *Graceland* is dismissive of Nigeria as a *real* environment that is worth living in anymore. This is the reason its main character seeks an escape path to the United States through the form of impersonation that vocally translates itself into the paralysis, squalor, self-deceit, and the fantasy that characterize post-independence Nigeria in the novel.

The foregoing discussion notwithstanding, these writers’ representations of the federation do not suggest that the conflict over its so-called national literature and unity has been resolved. Like their predecessors, contemporary Nigerian novelists demonstrate how rooted they are in

their individual ethnic cultures, although this point is difficult to prove with reference to Habila, since his novel does not pay significant attention to the traditions of any of the major groups. The novel is set in Lagos, but it depicts the country as an open space in which ordinary people, irrespective of their ethnic backgrounds, can converge and express the harm done to their existence by the long years of military dictatorships. The gathering of the journalists at Emeka Davies' house is an example of Habila's desire to construct a united Nigeria that transcends ethnicity. Habila also expresses this will through the diversity of the characters of *Poverty Street*. Brother, Joshua, Ojikutu, and Kela represent three different ethnic groups. Yet, they stand together in their struggle against an inhumane government that shows no restraint in oppressing the people it should protect. The strong bond between the people on Poverty Street, as well as the ones in Emeka's house, indicates a new form of pan-Nigerian spirit or nationalism aimed at combating military oppression. A similar picture is depicted in *Graceland*, with Sunday leading a charge against the government's plan to demolish Maroko and the King spearheading a march against the soldiers. All of the people at these rallies are members of different ethnic groups. They recognize a common enemy in the government, and they set out to protest against it.

As much as one would like to read these rallies as an outpouring of the people's frustrations and an indication of Nigeria's unity, they do not necessarily connote the absence of ethnic divides in the federation. Aside from poor governance, ethnic animosity is an ongoing problem in the Nigeria we meet in these texts. Even in *Waiting for an Angel*, a reference is made to ethnic tension. While Auntie Rachel's husband died as a federal soldier, her landlord, who was interested in her, "was burnt inside his car" during a protest (146). Similarly, Kela's mother is conscious of the killings orchestrated by ethnic hatred. She is afraid that her son might get killed in Lagos now that the rioters are "killing people on the streets there. Especially northerners"

(145). Embedded in all of these instances are the tensions and complex challenges ethnicity poses to Nigeria's existence as a united country in *Waiting for an Angel*. As much as Habila tries to obfuscate this problem by constructing a new pan-Nigeria, he cannot ignore one of the most visible realities that complicate the identity of his country in all the novels.

There is no questioning the fact that unlike Habila, Atta pays tribute to the Yoruba culture in her novel. As noted at the beginning of Chapter Four, Atta is of mixed ethnicity. She insists in her interview with Walter Collins that she has no particular ethnic group in mind whenever she writes, saying that "It is very hard for me to write from a Yoruba perspective when I don't speak the language and don't know how a Yoruba person feels about people from other ethnic groups in Nigeria" (123). Atta's claim may be true, especially in reference to her proficiency in Yoruba and knowledge of what the Yoruba people think of other ethnicities, but the domestic practices and family relations Enitan challenges are rooted in the Yoruba tradition. For example, Enitan describes her conversation with Baba, her father's gardener, this way: "I spoke to him in Yoruba, addressing him with the formal you, because I was his employer. Yoruba is a language that doesn't recognize gender—he the same as she, him the same as her—but respect is always important" (312). Elsewhere, she explains a Yoruba naming practice, saying that "Following Yoruba tradition, Yimika could have been called 'Yetunde,' 'mother has returned' to salute my mother's passing, but I decided against it" (318). She prefers to christen her daughter "Oluyimika, God surrounds me" (327). Of course, Atta could argue that she does not consider herself Yoruba or part of a major ethnic group, but she cannot deny that she selects the cultural background of her protagonist and privileges the Yoruba traditional values in *Everything Good Will Come*.

In fact, the title of her novel is an English adaptation of a Yoruba expression “*a da*” or *yi o dara*. Enitan is so elated about the release of her father from detention that she causes a huge traffic jam near “the junction of a residential road,” and she frustrates bus passengers and drivers in the process (334). One van driver shows his anger by cursing her, saying “Nothing good will come to you!” but she rebukes this negativity by responding with “*a da*. It will be good. Everything good will come to me” (335). In addition, she represents the gender relations in Yoruba as a microcosm of the oppressive patriarchal practices that subjugate women in Africa, and Nigeria in particular. The two instances cited from the novel suggest that Atta is well informed about Yoruba culture. This is understandable especially in view of the fact she was raised in Lagos by her Yoruba mother after her father died in 1972 (Atta and Collins 123).

Beyond this objection, Atta illustrates in her novel a wider Nigeria whose problems are mainly leadership failures and corruption. Enitan, Sunny, Mike, Grace, and Sheri are all caught up in the malady that afflicts the ordinary citizens regardless of their ethnicity. Enitan invites the reader to dissect Nigeria and its dysfunctional politics each time she uses the phrase “in my country” (179, 299). Enitan is fascinated by the idea of a united Nigerian nation-state in which there is also no gender discrimination or patriarchal control when she rhetorically asks, “What was the country I loved? The country I would fight for? Should it have borders?” (299). It is not a surprise that she provides no answer to these questions. She and Grace, who also claims that she loves her country, simply express a genuine nationalistic consciousness that is more than absent in the daily imagining of contemporary Nigeria (298).

Finally, my interpretation of these texts also implies that the country has lost the opportunity to achieve coherence and to solidify the initial gains of independence from the

colonial government. Consequently, what emerges from my analysis is the general glide of the of the protagonists toward affirming and ceaselessly longing for a political leadership that is superior to the everyday self-aggrandizing that is exemplified by neglect of the ordinary people, corruption, gender conflict, and so on. In the blank spaces of the texts is the opposite of the printed words: a desire for a better Nigeria. Since these novels discuss the Civil War and years of military dictatorships, it will be interesting to know if future works that narrate exclusively post-military governance in Nigeria will consolidate the concerns of the five works examined in this study or if they will channel a new path in Nigeria's literary productions, and depict the federation as a collective body. Given the pace at which Nigerian fiction is growing, there are possible indications that texts about the post-military era in the country are already being written, if not yet published. However the post-military works choose to construct or (re)construct Nigeria, the current realities in the country still do not suggest that closure will be brought soon to the conflict that continues to define the federal space as a dystopia. I would like to end with a great curiosity about whether by the time a new set of Nigerian novels will have fully emerged, they will be read as additions to the third generation texts, whose focus is the overwhelming disappointments of Nigerians in the post-independence era, or if they will be examined as more serious lamentations over what the country has failed to become: a "normal country," a moral stronghold ruled by sanity, altruism, and discerning individuals. Until then, the current discourse of the contemporary novel is germane to our understanding of the ongoing struggles of post-independence Nigeria.

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