Trinity College Dublin. School of Languages, Literatures, and Cultures
Dissertation, M. Phil in Comparative Literature

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Term 2020-21

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10 September 2021
I declare that this dissertation has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree at this or any other university and that it is entirely my own work.

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Acknowledgement

With appreciation to both my supervisor, Dr Clemens Ruthner, and Comparative Literature professor, Dr Peter Arnds.
“Writing back” – How non-Western authors represent postcolonial identity in literature: A comparison of Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun*

Abstract

“Writing Back” examines and compares how non-Western authors tell the story of the harmful impact of British colonialism on post-colonial conflict and displacement in two of the most ethnically diverse and highly populated countries in the world, India and Nigeria. Grounding their fiction in pivotal historical events and evolving postcolonial geography, critically acclaimed writers Salman Rushdie and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie consider identity through the lens and experiences of complexly intertwined characters who are repeatedly and forcibly exiled across ever changing national borders due to war resulting in migration. *Midnight’s Children* and *Half of a Yellow Sun* represent common challenges to national unity in newly emerging independent nations that are confined within improbably imposed postcolonial boundaries in terms of the complexity of language and ethnicity, the opening for corruption and propaganda, and the persistence of poverty and inequality.

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Note:
With the understanding that the term “Western” may sometimes be considered inadequate and is subject to interpretation, for the purpose of this discussion, it is associated with the countries of Europe and North America. (Oxford English Dictionary 2021, on-line).
Introduction – Balanced Storytelling

Context
Long years of colonial rule had a damaging impact on newly emerging nations struggling to coexist peacefully and form independent identities in the latter half of the twentieth century. War and conflict erupted in many previously occupied territories from which the colonial powers had extracted wealth, built dependent markets, and imposed their languages, religions, and cultures. And artificially drawn postcolonial borders brought the uprooting and exile of extended families and communities, resulting in a complex and divisive perception of identity.

By instilling in readers an understanding of the human toll of colonialism, literature can play an important role in conveying a more nuanced view of this phenomenon. Historical truth, depending on when, where, and by whom it is written, is subject to perspective, memory, and imagination. Ancient cultures held different beliefs than the nations that rose from them, and the history books written by the colonial powers told a different story than those that were rewritten by authors from subsequently independent territories. In this global context, historical fiction, unlike pure fantasy, if grounded in actual events, represents some comprehensible version of reality. And though by definition fictional storylines and characters are imagined, when engaging and recognizable to readers, such narratives can combine with non-fiction texts to provide a more balanced understanding of human experience, importantly including that of people living through the fallout of the postcolonial war, exile, and migration.

Authors from countries formerly colonized by the British, among other imperial powers, have “written back,” engaging audiences to think critically about the impact of postcolonial conflict and displacement on identity through the lens of people that have experienced it firsthand. As to the role of the non-Western writer, Nigerian Chinua Achebe, notably remembered as the “father of African literature,” shares his perspective on the position of African writers:

It was important to us that a body of work be developed of the highest possible quality that would oppose the negative discourse in some of the novels we encountered. By “writing back” to the West we were attempting to reshape the dialogue between the colonized and the colonizer. Our efforts, we hoped, would broaden the world’s understanding, appreciation, and conceptualization of what literature meant when including the African voice and perspective. We were engaged in what Ode Ogede (Nigerian American academic) referred to as the politics of representation (Achebe 2013, 55).

Justification
To offer some awareness on how non-Western literature can contribute to understanding the nature of postcolonial strife, this review contrasts the work of two critically acclaimed, non-Western authors, Salman Rushdie and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, in terms of its: 1) grounding

A comparative analysis across formerly colonized geographic regions has the potential to shed light on the commonalities of postcolonial displacement and identity. And while there is much written on this subject, there seem to be limited comparisons across the non-Western literary world, and therefore a rationale for examining the critical role of non-Western authors in rendering an alternate understanding of the experience. Beyond the likeness that both authors use national allegory to recount postcolonial war and exile in former British colonies through the fictional lens of family and community, as written primarily in the language of their colonizers, Rushdie and Adichie also provide contrasting perspectives: one Indian and one Nigerian, one male and one female, and one writing about 1940s Asia and the other about 1960s Africa. In connecting *Midnight’s Children* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*, a noteworthy starting point for discussion is that Salman Rushdie and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie share and profess a common philosophy that human history cannot be condensed into a single truth or story.

Salman Rushdie, referring to himself as being “accused” of magical realism, considers this genre simply “another door to the truth,” suggesting that when grounded in actual events, elements of the fantastic enable one to arrive at the truth in a different way. And with a critical eye toward the term magical realism, he laments that audiences tend to focus on the “magic” and forget about the equally important “real.” (Rushdie 2010, Big Think). Questioned during a more recent interview about the existence of multiple truths, the author provided some postcolonial context for his philosophy on truth in narrative:

> There are things that are so, factually, observably, and provably so. But obviously there’s another sense in which the truth is a contested thing. I grew up in the immediate aftermath of the British empire and what the British told people was the truth about that event was very rapidly proved to be something very unlike the truth. I remember in India as a child the history books changing from the ones that the British had left behind to the ones that had been written after independence, and people that had been characterized as villains were now characterized as heroes because of their part in the independence struggle. (Rushdie 2020, PBS Newshour).

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie warns of the “The Danger of a Single Story.” In a 2013 lecture, she recounts how as a child in Nigeria, she was exposed to only British and American books, and so was under the impression that all published work had to be about foreigners; indeed, it was not
until she discovered African writers that she realized that people she personally identified with could exist in literature. Adichie contends that the commonly held impression of Africa as a place of poverty and failure, where people are unable to speak for themselves, comes from the West and further argues that this perception is based on the global power structure:

It is impossible to talk about the single story without talking about power: The single story of Africa ultimately comes from Western literature... A tradition of telling African stories in the West. A tradition of sub-Saharan Africa as a place of negatives, of difference, of darkness. Like our economic and political worlds, stories too are defined by the principles of power. How they are told, who tells them, when they are told, how many stories are told are dependent on power. (Adichie 2013, TED talk).

The author concludes her lecture affirming that stories matter, but cautions that the single story flattens experience, emphasizes human differences, and creates stereotypes; she is often quoted for saying: “The problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.” (Adichie 2013, TED talk).

Consistent with Rushdie’s and Adichie’s perspective on balanced storytelling, in his early writing on colonial culture and the question of identity, Kenyan literary and postcolonial scholar Simon Gikandi warned of the need to look both within and beyond the postcolonial stereotype:

If post-coloniality has been defined as the transcendence of imperial structures and their histories, such a definition is obviously contradicted by the everyday experience and memories of the people in the ex-colonies. But the assumption that the lives and experiences of people in so-called Third World countries are wretched because they are perpetual victims of their colonial past similarly needs to be questioned. (Gikandi 1996, 15).

**Materials**

To provide both intertextual and international perspective, in addition to the two fictional novels analyzed, the following literature was reviewed: supporting texts on 1) postcolonial history published by Indian and Nigerian authors; 2) geography and politics published by the Smithsonian Institution and National Geographic Society; 3) language and identity by Kenyan, Ghanaian, and British scholars; 4) journal articles that analyze the two novels; 5) edited compendiums on comparative and multilingual literature; 6) online videos with the authors made public by TED talk, The Big Think, and the PBS Newshour; and 7) news articles, maps, and fact sheets from recognized international sources on country geography, population size, language diversity, corruption, and poverty indices. (see bibliography for details). While a range of literature was reviewed, in particular work published by South Asian, sub-Saharan, and British authors, as the relationships between these regions is the focus of this dissertation, it is important to qualify this analysis as having been drawn from select sources. It is accordingly far from the complete and multifaceted story of postcolonial life in India or Nigeria.
Section 1. Colonial History and Geography – Contextual Grounding

With the Americas having been earlier colonized and now gaining their independence from Europe, the nineteenth century saw the second wave of the great European competition for global power and wealth increasingly turn its attention to Asia and Africa. In 1858, after a failed revolt for independence, Britain, which had begun acquiring private controlling interests in South Asia in the 1600s through the British East India Company,¹ began its nearly ninety-year direct rule of the Indian subcontinent, the British Raj.² And during the final two decades of the 1800s, Europe’s colonial powers of the time, including Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Portugal, and Spain, along with Britain, began a new imperialistic race, the so-called “Scramble for Africa” to occupy the here-to-fore unconquered territories of Africa, to the extent that by the turn of the new century, they had carved up most of the continent among them.³

The independence movement in the British-ruled Indian subcontinent and territories in sub-Saharan Africa, the latter today sometimes accordingly referred to as Anglophone Africa, began in the twentieth century, with India gaining its independence and the creation of Pakistan in 1947, and many of the colonized countries of Africa, including Nigeria in 1960, obtaining their freedom in the second half of the century (Ghana was the first, in 1957). As told in Midnight’s Children and Half of a Yellow Sun, respectively, the postcolonial societies of the newly forming nations of India and Nigeria were heavily impacted by their colonial pasts, with narratives and boundaries often blurred in the process of emerging autonomy.

Recognizing the intellectual heritage that Western literature derives from cultures including the Greeks and Arabs, and comparatively placing modern literature in the above-described colonial context, Ghanaian philosopher and cultural theorist Kwame Anthony Appiah argues:

> Given that the economic basis of modern capitalism depended on the labor of Africans, the gold and silver of the New World Indians, and the markets of Asia...when we come to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it seems to me that it does not make sense to study literature in the languages of Western Europe without exploring questions of empire, colony, and post-colony. (Bernheimer 1995, 55).

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¹ The British East India Company established its first trading post in India in 1608. By the middle of the 18th century, India was fractured into hundreds of weaker kingdoms. European weaponry and exploitation of Indian political division allowed the British to conquer these piecemeal. By 1800, the East India Company controlled much of the country. (National Geographic 2015, 66).

² In 1857-1858, a revolt by Indian soldiers threatened to force the British out of India. Instead, the British increased their control, creating the Raj under the direct rule of Queen Victoria. (Houston 2018, 244).

³ In 1850 Africa was a patchwork of kingdoms, most unknown to Europeans, but in the 1880s, the “Scramble for Africa” began with the exploitation of the Congo by Belgium. European nations raced to secure territory. By 1900, as much as 90 percent of Africa was in European hands. (Houston 2018, 243).
Illustrating the divergent interpretations of the colonizers and the colonized, in his introduction to the 25th anniversary edition of *Midnight’s Children*, Salman Rushdie describes the differing reactions of Western and Indian audiences to his fictional portrayal of the history of India: ‘In the West people tended to read Midnight’s Children as a fantasy, while in India people thought of it as pretty realistic, almost a history book.’ (Rushdie 2005/1981, xiii-xiv). Interpretation is by nature subjective, but either way, this novel brought a critical version of the history of twentieth century India to life. While his story is one of fiction and mysticism, Rushdie inextricably links its plot and characters to actual events, encompassing a vast historical frame, from British colonial rule in the early 1900s, to independence and partition with Pakistan in the 1940s, to the war for East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and “State of Emergency” declared by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in the 1970s. Comparing the importance of the author’s fanciful portrayal of Indian history to the one written about Germany twenty years prior, the *New York Times Book Review* commented: ‘This brash, knowing, massive, aggressive novel is to modern India what Günter Grass’s *The Tin Drum* is to modern Germany.’ (Rushdie 1981, cover insert).

Historical coincidences are central to *Midnight’s Children*, so much so that Saleem Sinai, Rushdie’s narrator and protagonist (see section 2), is not only attached to, but often rendered responsible for rearranging the past. For example, in his Indian-imagined version of Pakistani history, Saleem claims responsibility for pivotal events; Rushdie places him, a boy of ten in exile there in 1958, at the table with the generals who planned Pakistan’s first military coup, after which the narrator fantastically describes himself as having been personally responsible for overthrowing the government and sending its president into exile. And later, when his family is ironically killed in an Indian air raid over Pakistan, Saleem absurdly equates their fate for having fled India and become Pakistani citizens as the cause of the second war between India and Pakistan: ‘Let me state this quite unequivocally: it is my firm conviction that the hidden purpose of the Indo-Pakistani war of 1965 was nothing more nor less than the elimination of my benighted family from the face of the earth.’ (Rushdie 1981, 385).

At the same time always grounding his readers in a critical version of the real along with the magical, Rushdie’s Saleem cautiously refers to his autobiography as his personal version of Indian history. Recognizing the influence that time and standpoint may have, he contemplates: ‘Reality is a question of perspective; the further you get from the past the more concrete and

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4 Prime Minister Indira Gandhi imposed emergency rule in June 1975 on the grounds that internal security was disintegrating toward chaos. Thousands of persons were detained during her emergency rule and the constitution was altered drastically to abridge civil liberties and restrict the press. (New York Times 1977).
plausible it seems – but as you approach the present, it inevitably seems more and more incredible.’ (Rushdie 1981, 189), and argues that truth can be rendered by use of metaphor to illustrate actual events: ‘Reality can have metaphorical content; that does not make it less real.’ (Rushdie 1981, 230). With respect to memory, when repeatedly questioned about the truth of his fantastic tale by his skeptical audience Padma (see section 2), Saleem frustratedly replies:

I told you the truth, I say yet again. Memory’s truth because memory has its own special kind. It selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies, and vilifies also, but in the end, it creates its own reality, its heterogenous but usually coherent version of events. (Rushdie 1981, 242).

Depicting the British Indian subcontinent before 1947, post-independent partitioned India and Pakistan in 1947, and independent Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan) in 1971, figure 1 below illustrates the reshaping of postcolonial borders across today’s nations of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh and accordingly serves as an important reference in understanding the course of displacement and migration that forms the historical context for Midnight’s Children.

Figure 1: Transitional maps of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, 1947-1971 (source: The road to India’s partition 2017, the conversation.com)

To this day, India comprises a diverse mix of languages, cultures, and religions (see Section 3), which even under British rule, had no central structure. When the English left in 1947, long-held differences, in particular religious separatism, essentially divided the region, with millions of Muslims fleeing to Pakistan and millions of Hindus and Sikhs fleeing to India, mostly on foot or in overflowing trains. Forced migration resulted in ethnic violence and death, with an estimated one million people killed and many more displaced.\(^5\) In regions the demographic size of the

\(^5\) Columns of people thirty thousand strong were on the roads as whole communities moved. Trains packed full of refugees crisscrossed the subcontinent. Riots broke out across both countries as Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs turned on one another in panic and fear. The British government refused pleas from the new Indian and Pakistani leaders for the few troops still in the countries to help maintain order. Estimates of the death toll vary, but at least a million people died. (Marshall 2015, 185-6).
subcontinent (for example, India today has the second largest population on the planet\(^6\), the number of people affected was so large that it seemed incomprehensible to the rest of the world and was, therefore, somehow easy to ignore. In Saleem’s narration of the subsequent migration caused by the Bangladesh war, Rushdie critically refers to this phenomenon as the futility of statistics: ‘During 1971, ten million refugees fled across the borders of East Pakistan-Bangladesh into India - but ten million refuses to be understood. Comparisons do not help “the biggest migration in the history of the human race” – meaningless.’ (Rushdie 1981, 411).

Like most children, young Saleem has a topographical impression of his country’s geography and limited understanding of the meaning of its unnaturally imposed borders with West and East Pakistan: ‘My perceptions were, while they lasted, bounded by the Arabian Sea, the Bay of Bengal, the Himalaya mountains, but also by the artificial frontiers which pierced Punjab and Bengal.’ (Rushdie 1981, 225). It is not until he endures a harrowing experience in school that Saleem is made aware of the political divide and resentment between the two nations. In a key scene, with reference to what he terms “Human Geography,” and in front of a room full of taunting schoolboys, a cruel teacher graphically compares Saleem’s face to the map of India, suggesting that his large hanging nose in the center is akin to the Deccan peninsula and the stains on either side of his brow to West and East Pakistan. By use of imagery and in the teacher’s words, Rushdie illustrates India’s deep-seated disdain for Pakistan:

In the face of thees (sic) ugly ape you don’t see the whole map of India? These stains, he cries, are Pakistan! Thees (sic) birthmark on the right ear is the East wing, and thees (sic) horrible stained left check, the West! Remember, stupid boys: Pakistan ees (sic) a stain on the face of Indial! (Rushdie 1981, 265).

The first war between India and Pakistan broke out in 1947 shortly after partition, and was fought over the region of Kashmir, which in 1948 was divided along the “Line of Control” (also known as Asia’s Berlin Wall) as depicted in figure 2 (Marshall 2015, 188). Kashmir, to this day disputed between India and Pakistan, with both claiming sovereignty, plays an important role in Saleem’s conflicted family heritage. Born there during British rule, his patriarchal grandfather Adam Aziz (see section 2), does not consider himself a

\(^6\) As of 2020, India was the second most populous country in the world with a total population of 1.4 billion. Pakistan had a total population of 220 million. (Population Reference Bureau 2020).
subject of the Empire, or for that matter even Indian, suggesting that: ‘Kashmir, after all, is not strictly speaking part of the Empire, but an independent princely state.’ (Rushdie 1981, 37).\footnote{Though a majority of Kashmiris want independence, Kashmir remains a place where a sporadic proxy war between Pakistani-trained fighters and the Indian army is conducted - a conflict that threatens to spill over into full-scale war with the inherent danger of use of nuclear weapons. (Marshall 2015, 190).}

Colonial Britishness is satirically portrayed throughout *Midnight’s Children*. Saleem lives on the estate of British East India Company officer William Methwold (see Section 2) within which the individual homes are irreverently named after the majestic palaces of Europe, with his family characteristically residing at Buckingham Villa. Growing up in a formerly British area of Bombay permeated by English street and site names, such as Cornwallis Road and Victoria Terminus, Saleem recalls the segregated white swimming pool in the shape of India of the Old Willington Club of his youth; the requisite evening cocktails in the gardens of his home: ‘Methwold’s estate is changing them. Every evening at six they are out in their gardens, celebrating the cocktail hour’ (Rushdie, 109); and the feigned English-accented boasts of his father: ‘aping the Oxford drawl anxious to impress the departing Englishman... “Actually, Old Chap, ours is a pretty distinguished family as well” (Rushdie 1981,122). He recounts how by association, anything made in India was perceived as inferior: ‘he pulled (the knob), and the lock came away in his hand. “Indian-made,” he whispered, as if that explained everything’ (Rushdie 1981, 52), and how the larger British-dominated planet on which he lived was akin to a broken toy globe:

> A tin orb, on which were imprinted the continents and oceans; two cheap metal hemispheres, clamped together by a plastic stand. It was a world full of labels. And at the North Pole it bore the legend MADE IN ENGLAD. When this tin sphere lost its stand, I found Scotch Tape and stuck the earth together at the Equator. I clanked my tin sphere around the estate, secure in the knowledge that the world was still in one piece (although held together by adhesive tape). (Rushdie 1981, 305).

Saleem vividly narrates how when the British left India in droves, with his own departure imminent, Methwold, sipping his scotch, praised Britain’s superiority in building India’s schools, roads, and railway trains, along with its role in bettering the country’s own historically majestic creations: ‘Taj Mahal was falling down until an Englishman bothered to see to it.’ (Rushdie 1981, 106-7). And of the Indian businessmen who were following in the footsteps of their predecessors, the boy imagines: ‘It seemed that the gargantuan efforts involved in taking over from the British and becoming masters of their own destinies had drained the color from their cheeks. The businessmen of India were turning white.’ (Rushdie 1981, 204). Still, at that time, as described by Achebe, India’s independence from Britain gave hope to Africa: ‘We were all looking forward to feeling the joy that India – the great jewel of the British Empire – must have felt in 1948.’ (Achebe 2013, 40).
Consistent with her belief in “the danger of a single story,’ Adichie, like Rushdie, writes of divergent interpretations of history by the colonizers and the colonized. In Half of a Yellow Sun’s book within a book, ‘The World Was Silent When We Died,’ which is intentionally written in the uncertain voice of character Richard Churchill (see section 2), a white British expatriate living in Biafra, the author offers some perspective on the Western view of the Nigerian civil war and related fear among emerging black African nations:

Britain inspired this silence. The arms and advice that Britain gave Nigeria shaped other countries. In the United States, Biafra was under Britain’s sphere of influence. In Canada the Prime Minister quipped “Where is Biafra?” The French sold Biafra some arms but did not give the recognition that Biafra most needed. And many black African countries feared that an independent Biafra would trigger other secessions and so supported Nigeria. (Adichie 2006, 324).

A striking example of differing interpretations of history is rendered when Adichie’s protagonist Odenigbo (see section 2) advises his houseboy Ugwu (see section 2) that to succeed in school, he must pretend that white colonial, rather than black African, is the true version of history:

There are two answers to the things they will teach you about our land: the real answer and the answer you give in school to pass. They will teach you that a white man called Mungo Park discovered River Niger. That is rubbish. Our people fished in the Niger long before Mungo Park’s grandfather was born. But in your exam, write that it was Mungo Park. (Adichie 2006, 14).

Later, empowered by the initial progress of the independence movement and Biafra’s secession from British-backed Nigeria, Odenigbo proclaims that it is high time that his people begin to decolonize education and teach their own history. (Adichie 2006, 94).

Comparable to Rushdie grounding her characters in pivotal historical events, Adichie brings the brutal reality of postcolonial Nigeria to life. Over the course of a single decade, as told in two alternating parts across the course of the 1960s, the backdrop and context for her story are the colonial influences of the English on the people of her country and the resultant three-year Biafran war for independence from the British-supported Federation of Nigeria. Her fictional characters are immersed in postcolonial society, repeatedly displaced from their homes, and forced to endure the horrors of war. Biafra, “The Land of the Rising Sun,” depicted on the country’s flag as the symbol of a radiant future, is illustrated by Adichie’s contrastingly

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8 The tricolored morphology of the flag of the Republic of Biafra, with its three horizontal bands of red, black, and green, symbolises the common ancestry and political aspirations of all black people around the world. The Biafran flag highlighted these aspirations with a rising golden sun and rays representing the eleven original provinces in the republic. (Achebe 2013, 151).
deflated title, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, and the postscript to her novel accordingly closes with the historic words: ‘May We Always Remember.’ (Adichie 2006, 543).

A visual for understanding the dramatic impact of colonialism on the African continent, and within this, Nigeria, figure 3 depicts the sheer magnitude and apparent randomness of the European takeover of its indigenous territories, the above-mentioned “Scramble for Africa,” historically settled by the Berlin conference of 1885.\(^9\) With their postcolonial borders drawn by colonizers who were largely unaware of and had little concern for the historically diverse languages, ethnicities, and religions of the African people, conflict was in many ways inevitable in the independent countries that emerged from colonial occupation in the twentieth century\(^{10}\).

![Partition of Africa 1885-1914](source: Multimedia learning 2010, WordPress.com)

\(^9\) Competition between the colonizers nearly resulted in conflict. The Berlin Conference (1884-1885) was called to settle claims and set rules for partitions. (Houston 2018, 249).

\(^{10}\) The ethnic conflicts within Sudan, Somalia, Kenya, Angola, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Nigeria, Mali, and elsewhere are evidence that the European idea of geography did not fit the reality of Africa’s demographics. Colonialism forced those differences to be resolved within an artificial structure – the European concept of a nation state. The modern civil wars are now partially a result of the colonialists having told different nations that they were one nation in one state, and then after the colonists were chased out, a dominant people emerged within the state who wanted to rule it all, thus ensuring violence. (Marshall 2015, 120-1).
The most populous nation on the African continent, Nigeria, including its oil rich Southeastern region of Biafra, as depicted in figure 4, was Britain’s primary strategic territory in French-dominated West Africa. Comparable to India and Pakistan, a complex mix of languages and ethnicities (see Section 3), and like other Sahelian countries whose borders were devised by the colonial powers to encompass disparate Northern and Southern regions, vast ethnic and economic differences existed then, as now, between Nigeria’s primarily Muslim North and Christian South.

Consistent with his adamant objection to the British version of African history described above, Adichie’s Odenigbo protests the European-drawn borders imposed on his people: ‘This is our world although the people who drew this map decided to put their own land on top of ours.’ (Adichie 2006, 12). Half of a Yellow Sun offers some potential context for Britain’s political motivation in attempting to confine Nigeria’s ethnically diverse regions as a single territory, and in doing so, satirically describes the creation of the Federation:

The British preferred the North. The Hausa-Fulani were narrow-featured and therefore superior to the negroid Southerners, Muslim and therefore as civilized as one could get for natives, feudal and therefore perfect for indirect rule. The humid South, on the other hand, was full of mosquitoes, animists, and disparate tribes. In the Southeast, the Igbo lived in small republican communities... In 1914, the British governor general joined the North and the South, and his wife picked a name. Nigeria was born. (Adichie 2006, 147).

Like Rushdie’s depiction of the forced migration on the Indian subcontinent, the number of people violently displaced during the Nigerian civil war was enormous and again therefore somehow easier to ignore. Through character Richard’s book ‘The World Was Silent When We

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11 As of 2020, Nigeria had a population of 206 million out of a total 1.3 billion on the continent. (Population Reference Bureau 2020).
12 Nigeria is formed from the territories of several ancient kingdoms that the British brought together as an administrative area. In 1898, they drew up a “British Protectorate on the River Niger” that in turn later became Nigeria. (Marshall 2015, 130).
13 In 1967, one million Igbo people fled Hausa violence for Eastern Nigeria, which seceded as Biafra. (Houston 2018, 418).
Died,’ Adichie tells of the world turning a blind eye to the horrors of postcolonial Nigeria, and within this, provides some perspective on the distrust between its British-supported Northern and independently minded Southern territories. Like Saleem’s globe flimsily held together by tape, Richard’s Nigeria is metaphorically held together by a clip:

The North was wary; it had always wanted a country separate from the infidel South. But the British had to preserve Nigeria as it was, their prized creation, their large market, their thorn in France’s eye. They wrote a constitution that gave the North control of the central government. At independence in 1960, Nigeria was a collection of fragments held in a fragile clasp. (Adichie 2006, 195).

Akin to Rushdie, Adichie satirically portrays British influence in Nigeria. With the empire crumbling, the ex-colonialists are now expatriates when her novel begins, and they, like in India, regularly host cocktail parties and attend the polo club, where, reminiscent of the all-white swimming pool in Midnight’s Children, Africans have only recently been allowed entrance. Comparable to the British East India Company, she writes of the English ex-colonial administrators and businessmen of the United Africa Company, who speak with authority about Nigeria, and like Rushdie’s Methwold’s brilliance on the subject of India, personify: ‘that familiar superiority of English people who thought they understood Africans better than Africans understood themselves.’ (Adichie 2006, 45).

Analogous to Saleem’s family and neighbors subserviently copying English speech, Adichie’s London-educated protagonist Olanna condescendingly describes Nigerians mimicking British accents as that: ‘comically contrived “white” accent that uneducated people like to put on.’ (Adichie 2006, 35). And comparable to the inferior view of anything Indian-made in Midnight’s Children, upon meeting her professor fiancé Odenigbo, Olanna’s British-influenced father berates Nigerian education: ‘The idea of Nsukka University was silly, Nigeria was not ready for an indigenous university, and receiving support from an American university – rather than a proper university in Britain, was plain daft.’ (Adichie 2006, 40).

Most dramatically illustrating harmful British political influence, Adichie’s characters sardonically rename Kwashiorkor (Ghanaian Ga for starvation), which was endemic and killed many in Biafra by the end of civil war, ‘Harold Wilson Syndrome,’ after the then pro-Nigeria British prime minister whose government was sharply criticized for its role in supporting the Nigerian economic blockade to Biafra:

Harold Wilson’s government found itself awash in a public relations nightmare at home and abroad. The bombing of civilian targets in Biafra by the Nigerian air force made the evening news and appeared in the major newspapers in Great Britain. Things were so tense that British dockworkers reportedly refused to load ships with British arms heading for Lagos, protesting that they were being used to kill “Biafran Babies.” (Achebe 2013, 101).
Section 2. Postcolonial Displacement and Identity – Use of Illustrative Characters

The human struggle for identity is at the heart of both *Midnight’s Children* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Each of the novel’s main characters move between past and present and is repeatedly displaced across ever changing postcolonial borders with their humanity and identities challenged. Rushdie, again considering the meaning of truth in narrative, suggests: ‘What we mean by truth in literature is human truth, the truth we recognize as human beings, about how we are with each other, and what is the meaning of our lives.’ (Rushdie 2018, Big Think). And of her humanly portrayed characters in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Adichie says:

I was determined to make my novel about what I like to think of as the grittiness of being human – a book about relationships, about people who have sex and eat food and laugh, about people who are fierce consumers of life. (Behdad 2014, 222).

As to the value of humanistic writing, Chinua Achebe proposes: ‘The notion of beneficent fiction is simply one of defining storytelling as a creative component of human experience, human life.’ (Achebe 2006, 57).

The following illustrative passages portray the five main characters of both *Midnight’s Children* and *Half of a Yellow Sun* that arguably represent the varied impacts of postcolonial conflict and displacement on the evolving nature of identity. While Rushdie and Adichie both present postcolonial struggle through the lens of the family, Rushdie’s novel is structured and told in the voice of a single narrator, who, feeling that he will soon die, is anxiously relaying his extraordinary family saga of nearly a century of Indian history to his devoted confidant. In contrast, Adichie’s novel is told through multiple character perspectives and structured in the form of the alternating and combined stories of its twin protagonists over the course of a single decade in Nigerian history, early 1960s independence and late 1960s war. This said, as Rushdie does with his characters in India, she reveals the newly born country of Biafra though the lives and relationships of her characters, who are, like their country, forming new identities.

Careful not to draw exact parallels between individual characters, similarities are considered across *Midnight’s Children* and *Half of a Yellow Sun* in terms of opposites and twins: Saleem Sinai and Shiva, and Olanna and Kainene, respectively; prominent family and partners: Aadam Aziz and Amina Sinai, and Odenigbo and Ricard Churchill, respectively; and devoted domestic household members: Padma and Ugwu, respectively. The latter two serve as confidants and listeners in grounding the stories of their privileged and often perceived as foreign employers, and as such, to a certain extent, interpreters of Rushdie’s and Adichie’s novels. Importantly, whether for reasons of language and ethnicity, wealth and education, or poverty and illiteracy, all these characters are at some point and in some way, “the other.”

Note: Surnames are indicated as commonly used in the novels.
**Sub-section 2.1 Midnight’s Children**

The below identities for Rushdie’s characters, beginning with “India” for narrator Saleem Sinai, are intended to suggest an association with the passages that follow illustrating the author’s portrayal of how these individuals struggle to define their identities in the context of conflict and exile, and resultant crisis in nationality. These are accordingly meant to contribute to the analysis and not define the multi-layered dimensions of the characters. As compared to other authors who “write back” about postcolonial struggle by use of illustrative characters grounded in historical events, including Adichie, Rushdie’s characterizations are less serious. As noted by Anuradha Dingwaney Needham in her article *The Politics of Post-Colonial Identity in Salman Rushdie*, his tone and stance is not typical, intentionally more playful, and less authoritative. (Dingwaney Needham 1988/89, 613).

**Saleem Sinai: India**

The novel’s narrator and protagonist, is, like Rushdie himself, born and raised in a Muslim family in Bombay. Saleem not only identifies with but personifies India, and therewith tragically perceives and narrates his fate as that of the newly forming nation, with the events of his life spanning and paralleling its postcolonial trials and tribulations. In his 2005 introduction to the 25th anniversary edition of *Midnight’s Children*, Rushdie describes his narrator’s exaggerated identification with India: “I even made the boy and the country identical twins.’ (Rushdie 1981, x). And indeed, he begins the novel by synchronizing the countdown to Indian independence on August 15, 1947 with the impending birth of Saleem, one of 1,001 babies born across India that midnight hour, and reinforces his character’s vital connection to this pivotal moment in history, along with his responsibility to his country, by means of a congratulatory letter from India’s first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru: ‘You are the newest bearer of that ancient face of India which is also eternally young. We shall be watching over your life with the closest attention; it will be, in a sense, the mirror of our own.’ (Rushdie 1981, 139). At the same time, the author paradoxically represents the depth of British influence on Indian identity by conflictingly making Saleem, who unbeknownst to his family has been switched at birth, the biological son of the East India Company Officer William Methwold who owns the estate on which they live. It is noteworthy that this portrayal seems somewhat of a nod to Grass’s *The Tin Drum* in which conflicted paternity is a measure of protagonist Oskar’s identity.

From here forward, Rushdie communicates the story of India by explicitly connecting fictional events in the life of Saleem to actual events in the newly forming country. Using the boy’s experiences as metaphors for the growing pains of the nation, he and the country are bound to one another, to the extent that in narrating his story, Saleem suggests India’s outright ownership of him: ‘From the moment of my conception, it seems, I have been public property.’
Continually displaced because of his identity, Saleem narrates his three exiles: the first, when his parents learn that he is not their true biological son and is forced to move in with his aunt and uncle; the second, when as a Muslim he is sent to spend his adolescence in exile in Pakistan: ‘I found myself hurled into an exile… flung across the partition-created frontier into Pakistan.’ (Rushdie 1981, 324), and the third, when he is conscripted to serve with but deserts the Pakistani army in the Bangladesh war of 1971. Rushdie sarcastically entitles his chapter detailing the narrator’s immersion in the ethnically mixed, ironically dubbed ‘land of the pure’ (Pak means ‘pure’ and stan means ‘land’ in Urdu), ‘How Saleem Achieved Purity,’ with Saleem, who never identifies as Pakistani, accordingly arguing: ‘It was not “my” country, although I stayed in it – as a refugee, not a citizen.’ (Rushdie: 334), and cynically commenting: ‘Purity – that highest of ideals! – that angelic virtue for which Pakistan was named.’ (Rushdie 1981, 377).

**Shiva: the destroyer**

Saleem’s nemesis Shiva represents Hindu India, identifying with the Hindu god of destruction and procreation, after who he is named. A changeling switched at birth with Saleem, in contrast to his privileged opposite, Shiva is raised in poverty by a single father, and as such, always struggling to survive. In some way akin to Kainene’s juxtaposition to Olanna in *Half of a Yellow Sun* (see below), he is realistic rather than philosophical, as is illustrated by his arguments with Saleem on the worthlessness of idle thinking and idealistic ideas: ‘When you have things, then there is time to dream; when you don’t, you fight.’ (Rushdie 1981, 293).

Like the other midnight’s children, Shiva is perceived by the narrator as: ‘only partially the offspring of their parents – the children of midnight were also the children of the time: fathered, you understand, by history’ (Rushdie 1981, 132). He is accordingly also burdened, but unlike Saleem, his connection to India is as that of its most decorated war hero, and as such determined and not passive, a victor and not a victim. Furthering Rushdie’s portrayal of the influence of conflicted paternity on identity, Shiva is also the biological father of Saleem’s son. The narrator’s rival then in both love and war, he is given the name Shiva the Destroyer by Saleem, and identifies with India accordingly, to the extent that his final appearance in the story coincides with India’s historic attainment of nuclear weaponry:

Shiva came back one morning in May 1974… perhaps at the very moment at which the deserts of Rajasthan were being shaken by India’s first nuclear explosion. Was Shiva’s explosion into my life truly synchronous with India’s arrival at the nuclear age? (Rushdie 1981, 468).
**Aadam Aziz: the Kashmiri patriarch**

Saleem’s grandfather, the character with which he significantly begins the pre-independence part of his story, is by nature of his birth in the valley of Kashmir conflicted about his identity. An educated Kashmiri, neither Indian nor Pakistani, and preferring modernity over tradition, Aadam is a stranger in his own land. Though married to a traditional religious Kashmiri woman, he is further portrayed as a conflicted believer in his Muslim faith: ‘He was caught in a strange middle ground, trapped between belief and disbelief... knocked forever into that middle place, unable to worship a God in whose existence he could not wholly disbelieve.’ (Rushdie 1981, 6).

Moreover, sent as a young man to study medicine in Germany by his well-to-do family, upon return to practice in Kashmir, Dr Aziz is ostracized by his community as that “Europe-returned chappie” and “German Aziz.” Indeed, one traditional elder disdainfully refers to his now impure identity: ‘He became – what? – a stupid thing, neither this nor that, a half and halfer (sic),’ (Rushdie 1981, 13) and mocks him for being a pretentious foreigner: ‘He comes back as big doctor sahib with a big bag full of foreign machines.’ (Rushdie 1981, 15). So branded an outcast, Aadam surmises: ‘the bag represents “Abroad”; the alien thing, the invader.’ (Rushdie 1981, 16). In his article *Midnight’s Children: Kashmir and the Politics of Identity*, Patrick Colm Hogan goes so far as to suggest that Aadam Aziz, notably the novel’s first portrayed character and family patriarch, is named and modeled after the first Adam, who, like Aziz and his wife’s departure from Kashmir, is exiled with his wife Eve from Eden. (Hogan 2001, 533).

Of all Rushdie’s characters in *Midnight’s Children*, Aadam’s storyline is perhaps the most dramatic. He is the first to be placed squarely in the center of actual events, in his case as the doctor attending to the wounded at the infamous April 1919 Amritsar massacre (also known as the Jallianwala Bagh massacre), in which a British officer, satirically described by Rushdie as: ‘the Martial Law Commander of Amritsar - an important man, after all; the waxed tips of his moustache are rigid with importance’ (Rushdie 1981, 34), ordered his troops to open fire on civilians. Foreseeing the first waves of resistance by an Indian population that was increasingly identifying with the outside world, Aadam notices an Indian soldier on the street and again contemplates the impact of the “Abroad”:

> The Indians have fought for the British (World War I); so many of them have seen the world by now and been tainted by Abroad. They will not easily go back to the old world. “The British are wrong to try and turn back the clock. It was a mistake to pass the Rowlatt Act,” he murmurs.14 (Rushdie 1981, 31).

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14 In 1919, the British introduced the Rowlatt Act, allowing indefinite detention of political agitators. In response Mahatma Gandhi ordered a “hartal” (strike) shutting down shops and businesses as a form of civil disobedience. When the British opened fire on thousands of Indians in Amritsar, Punjab, Gandhi called off the strike. (Houston 2018, 309).
Amina Sinai: Black Mumtaz

Because of her dark skin, Saleem’s mother Amina is nicknamed ‘Black Mumtaz’ as a child, and accordingly identified as inferior by both the British and Indians alike. Even her own mother thinks of her as: ‘The blackie whom she had never been able to love because of her skin of a South India fisherwoman’ (Rushdie 1981, 58), and her cousin, who talks of pretty white couples and lovely pink babies, comments: ‘How awful to be black, cousinji (sic), to wake every morning and see it staring at you, in the mirror to be shown proof of your inferiority! Of course, even the blackies know white is nicer.’ (Rushdie 1981, 75).

Amina’s path is one of continued displacement in India and eventual exile and death in Pakistan. Shunned after the forced ending of her first marriage to an anti-partition Muslim, Mumtaz changes her identity to Amina, marries Saleem’s imputed father, and moves to Delhi to start a new life. Victims of anti-Semitic based racist propaganda about their financial success, such as “Muslims are the Jews of Asia” and the related freezing of their assets, as well as violence, including the burning of her husband’s business, she soon flees from there too.

Padma: the listener

Seemingly on behalf of the novel’s readers, though she appears with less frequency than its other protagonists, Rushdie employs the final character discussed here, Saleem’s loving and devoted caretaker and ultimate second wife Padma, to serve as his steady but sceptical audience. A poor uneducated village woman, Padma, the grounded opposite of dreamy Saleem, enthusiastically and attentively listens to his fabulous stories, though in doing so, regularly questions his unreliable memory and hard-to-believe historical coincidences, to the extent that the narrator’s freewheeling tale is tempered through the lens of her knowing eye. Serving as the practical voice of criticism, she cries out ‘Oh God, you and your stories’ in response to one particularly incredulous rendition. Indeed, as he begins writing his tale, Saleem considers Padma’s role in interpreting it:

I have been interrupted by Padma... “So, if you’re going to spend all your time wreaking your eyes with that scribbling, at least you must read it to me,” but perhaps our Padma will be useful, because it’s impossible to stop her being a critic. “What do you know, city boy?” She cried – hand slicing the air. (Rushdie 1981, 29).

In essence, Padma serves to acknowledge and clarify some of the doubts and confusion Rushdie’s readers may have about the truth of Saleem’s incredible narration.
Sub-section 2.2 Half of a Yellow Sun

In parallel to *Midnight’s Children*, the below identities for Adichie’s characters, beginning with “the idealist” for protagonist Olanna, are intended to suggest an association with the passages that follow illustrating the author’s portrayal of how these individuals struggle to define their identities in the context of postcolonial war and migration, and ultimately lose their homeland. These are accordingly meant to contribute to the analysis and not define the multi-layered dimensions of the characters. With respect to the latter, Ruth Wenske suggests in her article *Adichie in Dialogue with Achebe: Balancing Dualities in Half of a Yellow Sun* that Adichie, like Achebe before her, “writes back” by use of complex and deeply intertwined human characters and not typical heroes or absolute villains. (Wenske 2016, 71).

Olanna: the idealist

A professor of sociology from a wealthy Igbo family, and among the most frequently appearing characters in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Olanna lives primarily in a Southeastern university town like that of Adichie’s childhood. Her storyline begins with her having just returned from completing a master’s degree in London; with a British education and flawless English, she is, like Aadam Aziz in *Midnight’s Children*, often treated as a stranger in her own land. Placed in the early postcolonial world of the 1960s, from here forward, Olanna is vitally immersed in the Nigerian civil war with the chaotic development of her life dictated by the events of 1967-70, during which time she is repeatedly forced to flee her home. Identifying as Igbo, but not Nigerian, Olanna struggles with otherness in her own country, both ethically and, as above, as a foreign-educated woman. Caught between stereotypes, she is ridiculed by the intellectuals who congregate at her husband’s home for having an accent that mimics the language of the oppressors, and at the same time shunned for being a foreign witch by Odenigbo’s traditional village mother, the latter which he explains to be the result of colonial imposition:

> Of course you have to be a witch. That is the only way she can understand it. The real tragedy of our postcolonial world is not that the majority of people have no say in whether or not they wanted this new world; rather it is that the majority have not been given the tools to negotiate this new world. (Adichie 2006, 129).

Europeanness surrounds Olanna from childhood. As an adolescent, she is sent to Heathgrove preparatory school, which she sarcastically describes as: ‘The iniquitously expensive and secretive British secondary school my sister and I attended. My father thought we were too young to be sent abroad, but he was determined that we be as European as possible.’ (Adichie 2006, 76). Her parents’ friends talk of foreign-made luxuries, such as the latest lace from Europe, and her Lagos society mother incredulously proclaims of a friend’s daughter’s wedding:
“Her daughter got married last year and they could not afford to import anything for the wedding. Even the wedding dress was made here in Lagos!” (Adichie 2006, 277).

In the aftermath of a massacre to rid the Northern region of Igbo people, in which her aunt and uncle are brutally killed, Olanna, who is visiting there, flees homeward to the South along with masses of Igbo refugees. And like the overflowing trains that crisscrossed East and West when crowds fled between India and Pakistan, *Half of a Yellow Sun*’s refugees also flee on packed trains, and in doing so, are similarly subject to ethnic violence. In one of the most disturbing but key scenes of the novel, Adichie depicts how Olanna’s harrowing train ride entails her being repeatedly thrown up against a bloodied and grief-stricken woman carrying her murdered daughter’s head back to their homeland in a calabash:

Olanna sat on the floor of the train with her knees drawn up to her chest and the warm sweaty pressure of bodies around her. Outside the train, people were strapped to the coaches. The train was a mass of loosely held metal, the ride un-steady as if the rails were crossed by speed bumps, and each time it jolted, Olanna was thrown against the woman next to her, against something on the woman’s lap, a big bowl, a calabash. (Adichie 2006, 188).

Returning to the Southeast traumatized, but still devoted to the Biafran cause, Olanna is thereafter repeatedly and often violently forced to flee with her family, frequently hiding in bunkers, within the new republic’s ever shrinking national borders.

*Kainene: the realist*

Olanna’s fraternal twin, Kainene, a strong and skilled businesswoman, is in some way like Shiva to Saleem in *Midnight’s Children*, her fearless and practical opposite. As an aggressive capitalist, she takes full advantage of her family’s wealth and good naturally teases her sister for her disdain for business, sarcastically commenting: ‘She’s always been terribly frightened of honest free enterprise.’ (Adichie 2006, 504). Kainene likewise mocks Olanna’s devotion to social causes and romantic choice of Odenigbo, giving him the name “revolutionary lover.” And unashamed of her identity, upon meeting Richard Churchill, tells him of the contrasting meanings of her and Olanna’s names: ‘We’re twins. Kainene and Olanna. Her name is the lyrical *God’s Gold*, and mine the more practical *Let’s watch and see what God will bring.*’ (Adichie 2006, 73). In contrast to her sister, she is amused by the irony of her Europeanness, has her photo in *Colonies Magazine*, and satirically comments accordingly to Richard about her extravagant house: ‘It’s monstrous. My father gave it to me last year as a bit of dowry, an enticement for the right sort

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15 The Nigerian-Biafran conflict created a humanitarian emergency of epic proportions. Millions of civilians flooded between towns and villages fleeing the chaos and conflict. (Achebe 2013, 169).

16 The Biafran republic’s capital was initially Enugu, a metropolis of over one hundred thousand at the time. When Enugu fell to the Nigerian army in 1967, the administrative capital of Biafra was moved to Umuahia. Following the capture of Umuahia on April 22, 1969, Biafra’s capital moved once again, to Owerri, the last administrative seat before the end of the war in January 1970. (Achebe 2013, 149).
of man to marry his unattractive daughter. Terribly European when you think of it, since we don’t have dowries, we have bride prices.’ (Adichie 2006, 86).

Like Olanna, Kainene identifies deeply with her Igbo roots, but is wary of Biafra’s leadership. She, too, is displaced, but unlike her sister, is skeptical of the insular news coming from within Biafra and listens to Nigerian radio for alternate interpretations of the events of the war and knowledge of enemy plans. Kainene immediately discerns that Nigeria will never be willing to let go of Biafra because of its oil and always questions what she perceives as her brother-in-law’s blind faith in the cause, at one point sarcastically asking him: “What an interesting beard. Are we trying to copy His Excellency?” and to Odenigbo’s negative reply, snidely commenting: “Of course, I had forgotten how original you are.” (Adichie 2006, 484). Eventually forced from her businesses by the blockades and shortages of the war, she turns her passion to running a refugee camp and is presumed dead crossing the Nigerian border to smuggle in food for the growing number of Biafran refugees dying of starvation, as described in Richard’s book:

Starvation was a Nigerian weapon of war. Starvation broke Biafra and brought Biafra fame. Starvation made the people of the world take notice and sparked protests. Starvation propelled aid organizations to sneak-fly food into Biafra at night. And starvation made the International Red Cross call Biafra its gravest emergency since the second World War.

(Adichie 2006, 297).

**Odenigbo: the revolutionary lover**

Adichie pointedly identifies Olanna’s staunchly anti-colonialist husband as Igbo by name. An outspoken advocate for Biafran independence, referred to as a “hopeless tribalist” by his university friends, Odenigbo proudly identifies as Igbo and rejects his British-imposed Nigerian identity: ‘I am Nigerian because a white man created Nigeria and gave me that identity. I am black because the white man constructed black to be as different as possible from white. But I was Igbo before the white man came.’ (Adichie 2006, 25). At the same time, an intellectual having studied abroad, Odenigbo, like similarly educated characters in both Rushdie’s and Adichie’s novels, is sometimes considered a foreigner in his own land. Indeed, the author opens *Half of a Yellow Sun* with houseboy Ugwu’s first impression of his strange new employer as having been damaged by his time abroad: ‘Master was a little crazy; he had spent too many years reading books overseas,’ and of his speech, thinking ‘It was Igbo colored by the sliding sounds of English, the Igbo of one who spoke English often.’ (Adichie 2006, 3-5). A believer in socialism and uncompromised self affirmation for black Africa, Odenigbo metaphorically argues with an American colleague about the colonial imposition of identity:

You Americans, always peering under people’s beds looking for communism. Do you think we have time to worry about that? Let’s assume that a capitalist democracy is a good thing in principal, but if it’s our kind – where somebody gives you a dress that they tell you looks like
their own, but it doesn’t fit you and the buttons have fallen off – then you have to discard it and make a new dress that is your own size. You simply have to! (Adichie 2006, 159).

Odenigbo’s sweeping and unquestioning trust in Biafran leadership under Ojukwu and distrust of what he perceives to be a weak puppet government of the British in Nigeria under Gowon,\(^17\) is the source of denial and overstated expectations, to the extent that at a student rally to celebrate Biafran independence in 1967, he addresses the crowd: ‘Biafra is born! We will lead Black Africa! We will live in security! Nobody will ever attack us! Never Again!’ (Adichie 2006, 205). And even after brutal defeat, Odenigbo notably returns home still carrying his Biafran flag folded in his pocket, to the bitter end identifying as Biafran.

**Richard Churchill: the British Biafran**

Adichie ironically gives her character Richard the same surname as the famed British prime minister. A foreigner in Africa who has rejected his Britishness, Richard falls in love with Kainene, and craving a sense of belonging, is excited by the prospect of a new identity that Biafra holds for him: ‘This was a new start, a new country... He would be Biafran in a way he could never have been Nigerian.’ (Adichie 2006, 211). Indeed, as an Igbo linguist and scholar, Richard considers himself Biafran, surprises people with his ability to speak the language with near fluency, and is hurt when identified as just another superior-minded European by his university colleagues, sensing among them a deep belief that the African and European would always be irreconcilable, at one point lamenting to himself: ‘It was wrong to assume that he was one of those Englishmen who did not give the African the benefit of an equal intelligence.’ (Adichie 2006, 143). Most tellingly, when accused by an Igbo acquaintance of being an agent of the Nigerian Government, which the man justifies by saying: ‘It is you white people who allowed Gowon to kill innocent women and children’ (Adichie 2006, 227), Richard responds by identifying himself in Igbo “Abu m onye Biafra” (I am Biafran).

Adichie describes how, like the discrimination against Muslims for their business prowess in *Midnight’s Children*, the expatriate community in which Richard circulates speaks in anti-Semitic racist tropes identifying the Igbo people as: ‘clannish, uppity, and controlling the markets. Very Jewish, really.’ (Adichie 2006, 194). But thoughtful Richard, similar to how Aadam Aziz considers the influence of the first world war on the growing push for independence in India, thinks to himself: ‘The second world war changed the world order. The Empire was crumbling, and a vocal Nigerian elite, mostly from the South, has emerged.’ (Adichie 2006, 195).

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\(^{17}\) The principal actors in the 1967 war were both young Sandhurst trained soldiers – Odumegwu Ojukwu (Biafra), who was thirty-three, and Yabubu Gowon (Nigeria), who was thirty-two. One was from a highly privileged background and the other was the so-called darling of the British establishment. (Achebe 2013, 118).
As a writer dedicated to the Biafran cause and taken seriously by the Western world because he is white, Richard uses his agency to expose Britain’s role in causing the war. In the end heartbroken by the loss of both Kainene and Biafra, he remains in Nigeria, but now acknowledging that he will always be an outsider there, passes ownership for the book ‘The World Was Silent When We Died’ to Adichie’s most knowing witness to Biafran life, Ugwu, conceding: ‘The war isn’t my story to tell, really.’ (Adichie 2006, 530).

**Ugwu: the storyteller**

Houseboy Ugwu’s trajectory is perhaps the most dramatic of the character storylines in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. A poor villager, he is shocked by the “alien” furniture and abundance of food that he is met with upon arrival in Odenigbo’s home and works desperately to identify with his new family by learning English. Later literate, he teaches Biafran refugees, along with Olanna, in the various towns to which they flee over the course of the war. When captured and conscripted by the Biafran military in its closing days, Ugwu, now a soldier, is excited to be finally fighting for the country with which he identifies, though as poignantly described by Adichie, laments to himself: ‘If only he was with a real battalion, fighting with a gun.’\(^{18}\) (Adichie 2006, 451).

A black Biafran, Ugwu can at first not comprehend ‘people that looked like Mr. Richard taking away the things that belong to people that looked like him,’ (Adichie 2006, 266). But this contradiction is rectified by the novel’s end to the extent that it is he, and not Ricard, who ultimately writes the story of Biafra. Though he has a more complex and central role, Ugwu is in some way like Padma in *Midnight’s Children* in that he offers a more relatable story through the eyes of the less privileged and most directly affected. Unburdening his soul of the painful memories of the war and at the same time giving voice to his people and the tragic events that they have endured by “writing back,” Ugwu is determined not to let the world forgot the horrors of the Biafran civil war of independence, yet in doing so sadly realizes:

> He would never be able to describe well enough the fear that dulled the eyes of the mothers in the refugee camp when the bomber planes charged out of the sky. He would never be able to depict the very bleakness of bombing hungry people. But he tried, and the more he wrote the less he dreamed. (Adichie 2006, 498).

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\(^{18}\) The Biafrans were completely outgunned compared to the Nigerians. The BBC documentary, *Biafra: Fighting a War Without Guns*, references how Biafran soldiers marched into war one man behind the other because they only had one rifle between them, and the thinking was that if one soldier was killed in combat the other would pick up the only weapon available and continue fighting. (Achebe 2013, 113-14).
Section 3. Emerging Independence and Nationhood – Representing Common Challenges

Beyond the issues of British colonial history and the postcolonial impact of this on identity, *Midnight’s Children* and *Half of a Yellow Sun* share related commonalities in their portrayal of the societal struggles of the newly emerging nations of India and Nigeria. Though there are varied parallels, discussed below are a select three represented by both Rushdie and Adichie alike as challenges to national unity and identity: the complexity of language and ethnicity; the opening for corruption and propaganda; and the persistence of poverty and inequality.

In large measure because of their intensely multilingual and multi-ethnic composition, as vividly represented in *Midnight’s Children* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*, both India and Nigeria struggled to emerge as unified nations. As argued by Kwame Anthony Appiah in *The Ethics of Identity*, ‘The Politics of language is a central and difficult issue in the management of many modern multilingual states, states whose plurality of languages result from histories of migration, both voluntary and involuntary, and of conquest.’ (Appiah 2005, 104-5). A lasting effect of Britain’s attempt to consolidate diverse colonial territories within improbable postcolonial borders, the World Economic Forum provides continued evidence of this dilemma, with both countries today classified among the top ten most linguistically diverse in the world, Nigeria strikingly at third, and India, though with approximately six times as many people, a close fourth.\(^{19}\)

Secondly, while government corruption is a problem for many countries, it can reasonably be argued that where a vacuum in governance structure exists, such as in nations transitioning from colonial control to postcolonial independence, there is a natural opening for power struggle, and, as portrayed in *Midnight’s Children* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*, a resultant tendency toward corruption and the use of propaganda to retain control by whichever group emerges successful. Indeed, though worse in Nigeria, all three countries of India, Pakistan, and Nigeria are to this day perceived to be corrupt and ranked accordingly by Transparency International.\(^{20}\)

Finally, though they are today considered by the World Bank to be resource rich middle-income countries, in both India and Nigeria, poverty is still widespread,\(^{21}\) and varied income inequality and class distinction, divisively depicted by both Rushdie and Adichie as challenges to the postcolonial emergence of these nations as unified entities, persist.

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\(^{19}\) In 2021, Nigeria ranks as the third most linguistically diverse country in the world with a total of 517 languages still spoken, and India ranks as the fourth most linguistically diverse country in the world with a total of 486 languages spoken. (World Economic Forum 2021, Davos).

\(^{20}\) In 2020, India was assessed at a corruption index rank of 86\(^{th}\), Pakistan 124\(^{th}\), and Nigeria 146\(^{th}\) among 180 countries surveyed. (Transparency International 2020, Berlin).

\(^{21}\) In 2020, India was assessed at a national poverty level of more than 20% and Nigeria at more than 40%. (World Bank 2020, Washington, DC).
Sub-section 3.1 – The complexity of language and ethnicity

Linguistic and ethnic identity in India is complicated and divisive, and as such a challenge to emerging nationhood. In a country where the official languages are Hindi and English, as depicted in figure 5, there are now more than twenty recognized languages, and a similar situation exists in Pakistan, where while the official languages are Urdu and English, there are five distinct regions, each with its own language.\footnote{The name Pakistan gives clues about these divisions. An acronym, P is for Punjab, A is for Afghania (the Pashtun area by the Afghan border), K for Kashmir, S for Sindh, and T stands for “tan”, as in Baluchistan. (Marshall 2018, 187).} In his book Empires of the Word, Nicholas Ostler charted the top three languages spoken in the world as Chinese (Mandarin), English, and Hindi, with Urdu and Tamil among the top twenty (Ostler 2006, 526). To this day, these same three remain at the top, and though the prevalence of Chinese and Hindi can be attributed to China and India being the two population giants of world, that of English is the result of Britain’s colonial expansion across North America, Asia, Australia, and Africa.

Within three years of passage of the English Education Act of 1835, the presence of English medium schools more than doubled in India, and in 1857, universities in which English would be the language of instruction were founded in the classic British Indian city of Bombay, where much of Midnight’s Children takes place, as well in Calcutta and Madras. (Ostler 2006, 503). But as postcolonial Indian scholar Ania Loomba points out, over time many Indians themselves, including nationalists, demanded English education; moreover, British educational policy was not simply imported from England, but molded for use in indigenous politics. (Loomba 1998, 96). English was formalized by India’s Official Language Act of 1963, and though its continued use is considered theoretically inferior to that of the many official native vernaculars of India, it has persisted, albeit in some places somewhat reluctantly, right up to the present day. (Ostler 2006, 503).
Even Hindi, which had been spoken in the Delhi region and become the official post-independence language of India in 1950, was vehemently protested by Indians in the other linguistic regions of the country; as Saleem’s matriarchal grandmother in Midnight’s Children notably argues: ‘If God meant people to speak many tongues, why did he put only one in our heads?’ (Rushdie 1981, 47). Indeed, the constitutional imposition of Hindi as the official language of India resulted in conflict around linguistic identity, including language riots, described by young Saleem in Midnight’s Children with rioters demanding the partition of the state of Bombay along linguistic boundaries and at one intense point, as the summer of the language marches when schools shut down and bus routes were blocked because of violence. (Rushdie 1981, 186). As vividly imagined by the narrator: ‘In 1956, then, languages marched militantly through the daytime streets, by night, they rioted in my head.’ (Rushdie 1981, 191).

In the preface to Midnight’s Children, Rushdie tells of his fascination with bringing together India’s native and English linguistic diversity by: ‘creating a literary idiolect that allowed the rhythms and thought patterns of Indian languages to blend with the idiosyncrasies of “Hinglish” and “Bambaiyya,” the polyglot slang of Bombay’ (Rushdie 1981, xi), but in the years immediately following independence, young Saleem, lamenting the language rivalries among the many midnight’s children living across the country, writes conflictedly of the 1955 reorganization of India into fourteen linguistically divided states:

The boundaries of these states were not formed by rivers, or mountains, or any natural features of the terrain; they were, instead, walls of words. Language divided us. Kerala was for speakers of Malayalam; in Karnataka you were supposed to speak Kanarese; and the amputated state of Madras, known today as Tamil Nadu – enclosed the aficionados of Tamil…the language marches grew longer and noisier and finally morphed into political parties. (Rushdie: 216).

Like India based on its colonial heritage, Nigeria’s official language is English, but it is likewise one of the most linguistically and ethnically diverse countries of the world. Among its many ethnicities, the three largest groups, speaking languages notably by the same names, include Hausa/Fulani in the North, Igbo in the Southeast, and Yoruba in the Southwest. The British, aware of the tribalism and ethnic tensions among these three main groups, took advantage of their differences to secure control, to the extent that: ‘By 1951, they had divided the country into Northern, Eastern, and Western regions.’ (Achebe 2013, 47), as depicted in figure 6.

Figure 6: Ethnic and religious map of Nigeria (source: Creative Commons 2012, commons.wikimedia.org)
Within this context, it is through the uncertain journalism of her character Richard that Adichie further depicts Britain’s colonial role in exacerbating post-independence conflict in Nigeria:

The tribes of the North and South have long had contact. No doubt they fought wars, but they did not massacre in this manner. If this is hatred, then it is very young. It has been caused simply by the informal divide-and-rule policies of the British colonial exercise. These policies manipulated the differences between the tribes and ensured that unity would not exist, thereby making the easy governance of such a large country practicable.

(Adichie 2006, 209).

Indeed, in *The Ethics of Identity*, Kwame Anthony Appiah writes of the ethically divisive position of the colonial powers, arguing that colonial-era management of “tribes” led to the creation and distinction of official subject ethnicities and leadership elites. And of independent Nigeria’s particular and exaggerated implementation of the same divide-and-conquer approach used by the British, goes on to quote: “Hausa-Fulani” was largely a political claim of the Nigerian Population Commission in their battle against the South, and only a few decades ago, ‘Yoruba” would not have been a common predicate of political identity.’ (Appiah 2005, 134).

Linguistic identity plays a critical role in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, with Adichie engaging her readers in the story of the Igbo people by scattered us of their language. As noted by Ruth Wenske, Adichie’s use of Igbo in her English text brings together not only these languages, but what they represent in terms of African and Western, native and foreign, and tradition and change. (Wenske 2016, 77). Moreover, the novel, though primarily written in English, makes clear from the start that its characters are speaking to one another in Igbo. And in contrast to *Midnight’s Children* where Indian ethnic groups protest to keep their languages, Adichie’s characters consider language in terms of class as well as ethic division, and with respect to the latter, often resort to having to mask their native tongues in order to escape ethnic violence.

English in *Half of a Yellow Sun* is associated with power and prestige. Olanna essentially only uses it in stern or serious conversations: ‘It was easy to be formal and cold in English’ (Adichie 2006, 272) or when she wants to project an air of authority: ‘She kept her English accent crisp and her head held high.’ (Adichie 272, 300). Illustrating the power associated with language in postcolonial society, in his initial encounters with her, houseboy Ugwu, who views English as a superior language and is accordingly struggling to learn it, wonders worriedly of Olanna’s beautifully spoken Igbo: ‘Her Igbo words were softer than her English, and he was disappointed at how easily they came out. He wished she would stumble in her Igbo; he had not expected English that perfect to sit beside equally perfect Igbo.’ (Adichie 2006, 28). And as the story progresses, considering her use of Igbo with him an insult, Ugwu defends himself by insistently speaking in English. In contrast, Olanna laments her lack of knowledge of native languages,
wishing that she could speak fluent Hausa and Yoruba like her family in Kano: ‘something she would gladly exchange her French and Latin for.’ (Adichie 2006, 50).

Insulated in the Southeastern university town of Nsukka, Olanna is naively shocked by how her cousin in Kano, when asked if she is Igbo, immediately slips into fluent Yoruba to avoid detection, as well by how generally easy it seems for her relatives in the North to deny their Igbo ethnicity to be spared Hausa prejudice. At the same time, in accordance with her belief in countering single story stereotypes, Adichie balances her portrayal of linguistic discrimination by the Hausa in the North with one of near proportion by the Igbo in the South; for example, with one man warning Ugwu: ‘What I am telling you is that we can no longer trust these minorities who don’t speak Igbo.’ (Adichie 2006,364). In many ways, ethnic violence during the Nigerian civil war is portrayed as determined by linguistic differences, as witnessed by character Richard in a key scene an airport massacre23 in the North in which Hausa soldiers round up the Igbo shouting: “Where are the Igbo people? Who is Igbo Here? Where are the infidels? and in rooting out and killing one man, brutally argue:

“You are Igbo.” The second soldier said to Nnaemake. “No, I come from Katsina! Katsina!” (Northern Nigeria). The soldier walked over to him. “Say Allahu Akbar!” The lounge was silent. “Say Allahu Akbar!” The soldier repeated. Nnaemake knelt down. Fear etched so deeply onto his face that it transfigured him into a mask that looked nothing like him. He would not say Allahu Akbar because his accent would give him away. (Adichie 2006, 192).

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23 The coup of January 15, 1966 was interpreted with plausibility as a plot by the ambitious Igbo of the East to take control of Nigeria from the Hausa/Fulani North. Six months later Northern officers carried out a revenge coup and Northerners turned-on Igbo civilians living in the North unleashing waves of brutal massacres. (Achebe 2013, 82).
Sub-section 3.2 – The opening for corruption and propaganda

In their struggle to emerge and develop as independent nations, like other postcolonial countries of the world, both India and Pakistan suffered power plays among competing leaders and ethnic groups trying to gain control within the borders that had been proscribed for them by the colonizers. This led to violence and war, exacerbated by political corruption and propaganda. To this day, though the situation is assessed to be worse in Pakistan than in India, both countries remain poorly perceived in terms of corruption (see footnote 20).

In his introduction to the 25th anniversary edition of Midnight’s Children, a book in which he intentionally excoriates Prime Minister Indira Gandhi for the “Many crimes of the Emergency,” Rushdie describes how he was accordingly sued by the conflicted leader for defamation (Rushdie 2005/1981, xiv). In contrast to the idealistic proclamation of her father, the first prime minister of India: ‘This is no time for ill-will. We have to build the noble mansion of free India, where all her children may dwell.’ (Rushdie 1981, 131), Indira Gandhi is portrayed as a divisive politician who comes to power because of her dynastic heritage and only stays there by way of a corrupt close-knit entourage. As to her imposed State of Emergency in 1975 and the related altering of the constitution (see footnote 4), Rushdie’s Saleem fantastically narrates: ‘I smelled the ghost of ancient empires in the air… in a city littered with the phantoms of Slave Kings, Mughals, and the last pink conquerors, I inhaled once again the sharp aroma of despotism.’ (Rushdie 1981, 488). Saleem’s reminiscent philosophy, to some extent like Adichie’s Odenigbo’s argument that postcolonial modernity had been imposed too rapidly on the traditional people of Biafra, bodes political failure for India:

I remain, today, half-convinced that in that time of accelerated events, the new-born, secular state was being given an awesome reminder of its fabulous antiquity, in which democracy and votes for women were irrelevant… so that people were seized by atavistic longings, and forgetting the new myth of freedom, reverted to their old ways, their old regionalist loyalties and prejudices, and the body politic began to crack. (Rushdie 1981, 280).

By the end of Midnights’ Children, a corrupt Indian government has arrested countless political dissidents, sterilized many of the poor, and destroyed the slum in Old Delhi; and Saleem, always putting himself at the center of events, is convinced that Indira Gandhi is out to kill all the midnight’s children because they, and not her, are the true representatives of India. Considering the then used expression “India is Indira and Indira is India,” he imagines her a competitor with a need to identify personally with the nation as profound as his own, and accordingly closes the related part of his narration to Padma with: ‘Yes, Padma: Mother Indira really had it in for me.’ (Rushdie 1981, 483-4).
*Half of a Yellow Sun* likewise strikingly depicts the prevalence of postcolonial corruption, though as portrayed by Adichie in 1960s Nigeria, this continues to entail British manipulation as well as Nigerian wrongdoing. With sporadic improvement over the last fifty years, as of today Nigeria is commonly identified as one of the most corrupt countries in the world (see footnote 20); whether this is fair or not can be debated, but the country does seem to have a history steeped in profiteering. Indeed, from the start of the novel, Biafran revolutionary Odenigbo vehemently protests corruption, both British and Nigerian alike, including depicting Nigeria’s first (and only) prime minister, Tafawa Balewa (assassinated in the January 1966 coup that started the war) as a stooge of the British complicit in deceiving his people: ‘They put him there, and they tell him what to do, and he does it. Westminster parliament model indeed’ (Adichie 2006, 139). And as the war proceeds, he decries Britain’s conspiratorial arms support to what he refers to as Nigeria’s neocolonialist regime.

Adichie’s Olanna takes notice of the likelihood of Biafran graft when an old university friend, now on the government payroll, visits their refugee home in a fancy car, well fed, and nicely dressed, but it is through Kainene, always the realist, that readers are offered a more balanced perspective on corruption. Aware of Biafran army leaders accepting bribes from the Igbo people, she is suspect of the Biafran and Nigerian causes alike, as well as of what she considers Biafran leader Odumegwu Ojukwu’s ambition, scornfully commenting amid rumors of tribal traitors in Biafra: ‘The only saboteurs we have are the ones Ojukwu invented so he can lock up his opponents and the men whose wives he wants.’ (Adichie 2006, 393). Moreover, defending a poor man for stealing food, Kainene righteously argues that his crime is understandable, and nothing compared to those of the wealthy and powerful Igbo, including her own family:

> My 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 rents that make it impossible to buy food.
> (Adichie 2006, 276).

*Midnight’s Children* satirically portrays government propaganda in both India, in which the prime minister is described as having her own news agency, and Pakistan, personified in the latter by Saleem’s sister Jamila, an acclaimed singer who by the time of her exile serves as of the ‘Voice of Pakistan Radio,’ through which she is regularly heard singing her country’s praises. Also in Pakistan, where the generals are described as buying up refugee poverty at absurdly low prices and the President has decreed an election in the form of a so-called “Basic Democracy,” Saleem tells of the divorce between news and reality, describing that while foreign economists refer to the country as “a model for emerging nations,” peasant complaints about the economic revolution go unreported; and while editorials praise the nation’s leadership, rumours run rampant about their Swiss bank accounts and the president’s son’s new American cars. (Rushdie 1981, 383). In keeping with Rushdie’s philosophy that there are varied perceptions of
truth, in the wars between them, both governments are portrayed as boasting the grand successes of their gallant boys, whether in fact they win or lose, and childishly proclaiming that the other side had started it, all of which is confusedly questioned by Saleem with respect to the fighting in the continually disputed region of Kashmir:

On August 30th, did Indian troops cross the cease-fire line near Uri to “chase out the Pakistani raiders” – or to initiate the attack? When, on September 1st, our ten-times better soldiers crossed the line at Chhamb, were they aggressors or where they not? (Rushdie 1981, 388).

Likewise in _Half of a Yellow Sun_, propaganda is depicted as rampant on all sides. His Excellency Colonel Ojukwu, who shows up in various scenes, including a visit to the dispirited army compound where Ugwu is stationed, is growingly portrayed as disingenous, Even idealistic Richard, notably now officially part of the Biafran “Propaganda Directorate,” upon introduction to the Biafran leader, cannot help but notice: ‘His Oxford-accented voice was surprisingly soft; it did not have the timbre that it did over the radio and it was a little theatrical, a little too measured.’ (Adichie 2006, 214). In historical terms, as the Nigerian civil war progressed, with both sides unwilling to concede, most critically leader Ojukwu in the face of endemic starvation and death in Biafra, many believed his continued engagement had become a ‘personal war and collision of egos with Gowan.’ (Achebe 2013, 126), (see footnote 17).

The post-coup takeover and killing of Igbo soldiers in the North is described by Adichie’s characters as not even reported by the Nigerian news, but first learned of by the people through the BBC, albeit whose editors are described as being supportive of Nigeria. And as in the propaganda fictionalized by Rushdie around the wars between India and Pakistan, both Radios Nigeria and Biafra boast glowingly about the successes of their brave boys, with Biafra’s leadership excitedly overstating or worse falsifying events on a daily basis: ‘The fast-paced drumming and magnificent voice were saying: This is radio Biafra Enugu! Here is the daily war report! – Biafran troops were flushing out the last remnants of the enemy, Nigerian casualties were high, and mopping-up operations were concluding –‘ (Adichie 2006, 249).

By war’s end, Ugwu, having witnessed the devastation of the meagerly armed Biafran army at the frontline, is so exhausted by what he considers: ‘the shabby theatrics of the war reports, the voice that forced morsels of invented hope down people’s throats,’ that he gets up and walks away when the family listens hopefully to Radio Biafra. And of His Excellency’s greatness concedes: ‘there is no such thing as greatness.’ (Adichie 2006, 500). In a final portrayal of government insincerity, Adichie excerpt’s leader Ojukwu’s departing announcement in her text: ‘In accordance with my own frequent affirmations that I would personally go anywhere to secure peace and security for my people, I am now traveling out of Biafra to explore...’ (Adichie 2006, 509).
Sub-section 3.3 – The persistence of poverty and inequality

The division between the rich and the poor in emerging nations recovering from colonial extortion of wealth, and moreover, like India, burdened by the remnants of a traditional caste system described by Ania Loomba as working in tandem with colonial superiority,\(^\text{24}\) presented a substantial challenge to post independence national unity. While avoiding individual stereotypes, both Rushdie and Adichie accordingly provide striking examples of the divisive impact of poverty and inequality on postcolonial society and national identity. Class plays a pivotal role in *Midnight’s Children’s* in which narrator Saleem and his family, with its foreign-educated patriarch and successful businesses, live a life of privilege and comfort. Similarly, in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, because of her family’s fortune in business, protagonist Olanna is a foreign-educated member of Nigeria’s and later Biafra’s elite. Central to both stories, however, is the upending of class wealth as the result of conflict, with these characters ultimately immersed in poverty, Saleem upon exile and Olanna as a refugee.

In the absence of genuine political leaders and government structures to address poverty systematically, both stories tell of efforts by individuals to do so. In *Midnight’s Children*, it is ironically for reasons of social equality that babies Saleem and Shiva are switched at birth in the first place; that is, so the one who would have been destined to poverty is given a chance at life. Indeed, these characters epitomize class division and inequality between the rich and the poor, with Shiva at one point explaining to Saleem why his beggar father had tried to maim him:

> He blindfolded me, man! You know what was in his hand? A hammer! Bastard was going to smash up my legs, man – it happens, you know, rich boy, they do it to kids so they can always earn money begging – you get more if you’re all broken up, man! (Rushdie 1981, 253).

In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, it is likewise for reasons of social justice that Odenigbo educates houseboy Ugwu, who though ironically and much to Odenigbo’s consternation, continues to refer to him as “master.” Adichie engagingly depicts the distinction between rich and poor when Ugwu meets his master for the first time and notices that: ‘His toes, which peeked through leather slippers, seemed feminine, perhaps because they were so clean; they belonged to feet that always wore shoes.’ (Adichie 2006, 7).

While in contrast to Adichie, Rushdie’s more playful novel, as told by his narrator, does not overtly depict the horrors of the war, with Saleem at one point in his story accordingly commenting: ‘I shall not describe the mass blood-letting in progress on the frontiers of the

\(^{24}\) Various tribal people, historically repressed by the upper castes and already relegated to the margins of Hindu society, were also regarded by the British authorities as less sophisticated, more warlike, child-like and gullible. (Loomba 1998, 105-6).
divided Punjab, where the partitioned nations are washing themselves in one-another’s blood’ (Rushdie 1981, 125), what these stories do share is social commentary about who does and does not do the actual fighting. In both cases, it is the poor. Denouncing class privilege in independent India, *Midnight’s Children’s* socialist rebel Joe notably protests: ‘this independence is for the rich only; the poor are being made to kill each other like flies. In Punjab, in Bengal. Riots, riots, poor against poor.’ (Rushdie 1981, 116). And indeed, it is poor Shiva and not privileged Saleem who fights India’s wars, though in further illustration of this point, it is only once the latter becomes poor and Pakistani that he is conscripted to do so.

Similarly, it is not the educated revolutionary idealists like Odenigbo who serve in *Half of a Yellow Sun’s* war of independence, but the poor, like Ugwu, who are rounded up and conscripted. By war’s end, stereotypically perceived as a idealistic intellectual by the Nigerian soldiers on the ground, Odenigbo is slapped and humiliated for being one of those upper class academics who caused, but did not fight in, the war: ‘Ah Nsukka University. You are the ones who planned the rebellion, you book people.’ (Adichie 2006, 520). And Richard, another academic advocate for war as a means to social justice, is likewise naively portrayed by Adichie for proclaiming unconvincingly to his foreign correspondent colleagues: ‘A country born from the ashes of injustice would limit its practice of injustice.’ (Adichie 2006,395).

Poverty in *Midnight’s Children* is primarily illustrated within an urban context; in particular by the division between the dark and winding streets of the slum in Old Delhi, an eyesore to the city’s high-class residents which is accordingly demolished by the Indian government as a threat to society, and the bright wide avenues and impressive buildings of the British-created prosperous New Delhi, as reflected upon by Saleem’s mother Amina:

You could not see the new city from the old one. In the new city, a race of pink conquerors had built palaces in pink stone, but the houses in the narrow streets of the old city leaned over, jostled, shuffled, blocked each other’s view of the roseate edifices of power. Not that anyone ever looked in that direction anyway. In the Muslim muhallas or neighborhoods, people were content to look inward. (Rushdie: 1981, 74).

In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, poverty is portrayed by both the distinction between urban and rural, and perhaps more importantly in political terms, North and South, including, respectively, by way of contrast in lifestyle between upper class Nigerian society in Lagos and the country’s majority poor of the villages, and the disdain in the traditional Hausa/Fulani North for a progressive Igbo South that was becoming too rich and powerful. Adichie grippingly illustrates the disparity in power between the rich and the poor in Olanna’s perceptive considerations of the powerless village girl with the downcast eyes that Odenigbo has a sexual encounter with:

A plain village girl curled up on the bed as if she were cringing from one more furious blow from life. She had not said no to Odenigbo because she did not even consider that she could say
no... He was the master, he spoke English, he had a car. It was the way it should be... How much did one know of the true feelings of those who did not have a voice? (Adichie 2002, 313).

Unlike self-indulgent Saleem in *Midnight’s Children*, who acknowledges the plight of the poor, but does seem to care about it, Adichie’s well-to-do characters struggle with their class. Olanna, for example, unable to shed her elitism, reluctantly finds herself worrying that her daughter will pick up a ‘bush accent’ from the other children when living among them as a refugee, and upon finding lice in her hair, complains ‘It must be those dirty neighbors you play with, those dirty neighbors.’ (Adichie 2006, 347). But it is again Kainene, the realist, and capitalist, who unequivocally admonishes her ironically socialist brother-in-law Odenigbo for his mistreatment of a poor man stealing food: ‘Does inequality have to mean indignity.’ (Adichie 2006, 276).

Perhaps sometimes simplistically, but with the intended purpose of contrasting negative stereotypes in postcolonial narrative, both novels simultaneously depict the poor of their societies as unequal to the rich in terms of material wealth and opportunity, but generally content with life, with their privileged counterparts, in contrast, often unsatisfied, as illustrated by the different perspectives of Padma and Saleem in *Midnight’s Children*. Indeed, in many ways, it is during the narrator’s time in the warrens of the Old Delhi ghetto that he seems most content. Likewise, Ugwu in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, though no less thoughtful, is portrayed as more content than his upper-class employer Odenigbo, with the latter, though he does not experience it personally, always railing against societal unfairness. It is perhaps in this context that spiritualism and faith connect with class in furthering societal divide, with Ugwu, for example, to the end believing in the powers of the “dibia” (Igbo for traditional healer) and his village sister happily proclaiming upon his return after the war: ‘I knew you did not die. I knew your chi was wide awake.’ (Adichie 2006, 526). In this context, the wealthy educated characters, including Olanna, who like *Midnight’s Children’s* Aadam Aziz is unsure of her faith, and Odenigbo, a proclaimed atheist, seem one step further separated from the less privileged.

While recognizing the divisiveness of societal inequality in Nigeria, in *The Dangers of a Single Story*, Adichie counters the negative stereotype of the individual poor in Africa with a story from her own upbringing in a middle-class Nigerian family; recounting how she had pitied their poor houseboy until visiting his village one Saturday and being shown a beautifully patterned basket that his brother had made; she explains:

The only thing my mother told us about him was that his family was very poor... I was startled. It had not occurred to me that anybody in his family could make anything. It had become impossible for me to see them as anything but poor. Their poverty was my single story of them. (Adichie 2008, TED talk).

Indeed, it is accordingly Ugwu, the authentic voice of Biafra, who is given the final word by Adichie for telling its story.
Conclusion

While many university literature programs in Europe and North America have continued to focus on the analysis of texts by Western authors, the added inclusion of work by non-Western writers, in particular in today’s global context in which people are increasingly connected by way of technology, can render both a broader and more nuanced understanding of human experience. “Writing back” plays a critical role in addressing societal stereotypes, including around postcolonial identity in terms of gender, race, religion, ethnicity, and class, among other social constructs, and can accordingly influence and improve how people identify with, learn from, and positively influence one another.

In terms of colonialism, when one thinks of fiction, the first novel that often comes to mind is Joseph Conrad’s acclaimed novella *Heart of Darkness*. A poignantly written European classic deeply critical of the hypocrisy of imperialism; for example, describing the horrors of Belgium’s presence in the Congo as: ‘just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale...the conquest of the earth which mostly means taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter nose than ourselves’ (Conrad 1902, 10), *Heart of Darkness* is at the same time deeply negative in its portrayal of native Africans as monsters or animals. As an example, upon his arrival in the Congo, protagonist Marlow comments: ‘While I stood horror-struck, one of these creatures rose to his hands and knees and went off on all-fours towards the river to drink.’ (Conrad 1902, 25), and later in the story, derisively describes a Western-clothed African man on his ship as looking like a dog in breeches walking on his hind legs.

Indeed, in his 1975 paper *An Image of Africa*, Chinua Achebe goes so far as to refer to Conrad as a “bloody racist” and vehemently counters the commonly held view that his novel is redeemed by its more charitable depiction of its dull-witted natives than that of its unscrupulous Europeans. Achebe effectively “writes back,” instead arguing that the novel unfairly dehumanizes Africans and: ‘projects an image of Africa and Africans as “the other world,” the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization.’ (Achebe 1975, 783).

Beyond critical commentary, “writing back” has also taken the form of new stories being written to counter poorly understood biases in earlier fiction, exemplified in specific terms by Jean Rhys’s 1966 novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* in which she provides the back story for Charlotte Brontë’s characterization of Caribbean-born Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*. Rhys, a British novelist raised in the colonized Caribbean, counters Brontë’s image of Bertha as a confined madwoman, notably dark, who, like Conrad’s Africans, is described by the novel’s protagonist as inhuman: ‘What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not tell; it grovelled, seemingly on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal, but it was covered in clothing
with a quantity of dark, grizzled hair.’ (Brontë 1847, Vol. 2 70). In dramatic contrast, Rhys’s Bertha is portrayed as a sensitive and intelligent young creole woman from the European colonized West Indies who is sold into marriage in England.

It is likely that had they been writing in the latter half of the twentieth century, or in their own words and not those of their protagonists, both Conrad and Brontë would have more humanly or even respectfully presented their characters. This said, it remains that their novels, as originally written, are to this day regularly included as classic texts in literature programs across the Western world, and in this context, it seems clear that their current readers would benefit from postmodern criticism and counter perspective, such as that provided by Achebe and Rhys.

With respect to this analysis of how Rushdie and Adichie effectively “write back,” in her article *The Politics of Post-colonial identity in Salman Rushdie*, Anuradha Dingwaney Needham contends that in the 1980s, Rushdie’s unique voice articulated a “substantially different truth,” and as such, served as a timely and strategic intervention that could not be ignored by Western intellectuals who had continued to invoke stereotypes about the formerly colonized world. Dingwaney Needham goes on to argue that the power of Rushdie’s “oppositional rhetoric” is among the likes of French West Indian Franz Fanton, Kenyan Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Nigerian Wole Soyinka, Colombian Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and Palestinian Edward Said (Dingwaney Needham 1988/89, 612), all notably engaging, and even challenging, non-Western postcolonial writers, but also all men.

While there seems to be of a fair amount of counter-perspective to Western postcolonial stereotypes in literature, there are still limitations, in particular in terms of female authorship and perspective. Acknowledging that *Half of a Yellow Sun* was written a full twenty-five years after *Midnight’s Children*, in comparing the two, strong critical analyses of Rushdie’s work were more prevalent than those of Adichie’s, and with the respect to the latter, one analysis, though published in a reputable journal, contained factual errors about key elements of the book; for example including reference to protagonist Richard Chur...
Yellow Sun, was only written in 2006, does not include any reference to Igbo, or for that matter, Swahili, the most spoken local language in sub-Saharan Africa.

While the Western classics are clearly of critical importance in the study of literature, not to mention most enjoyable, further intertextual analysis of non-Western postcolonial literature across regions and disciplines, the latter including history, political science, and philosophy, among others, and as related to broad social constructs, such as gender and religion, neither of which is intentionally studied here, would add considerable value to the more traditional study of comparative literature. With the understanding that formerly colonized regions are now often more diverse from one another than they are from their colonizers, and that undergraduate programs, or even one or two-year postgraduate courses, essentially only allow time for a thorough analysis of a select set of complex texts, as discussed throughout this dissertation, there are substantial commonalities. There are indeed now many seminal non-Western novels that provide the opportunity for further comparative research, including with Western literature. In essence, comparative literature seems an appropriate discipline within which to further explore and contribute to the notion of “writing back.”
Bibliography

Primary Texts


Supporting Texts


