

Point of View: Manner of Realizing the Matter in Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*

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Abstract

The best form of art is the blending of form and content; means and end; manner and matter. Therefore, the uniqueness of any novelist's product is contingent upon how well or otherwise their peculiar application of fictional technique or manner such as point of view has enhanced the expression of that writer's world view or vision of society. This study aims at examining point of view as a technique or manner available to Adichie in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, in order to demonstrate how it has helped her to discover meaning or matter. To this end, the concepts of technique or manner, and meaning have been defined. There is also an x-ray of the fictional technique of point of view, and the effects or matter derived through its application in the work under study.

Introduction

Novelists apply literary innovation through linguistic creativity, proper selection of and the effective application of relevant fictional methods in the process of realising specific narrative objectives. They include: language, irony, symbolism, point of view, plot and fictional structure, and characterisation. African writers have a lot to write about. They include slavery, colonialism, neo-colonialism, military incursion into politics, civil wars, capitalism, female experience, and so on. These phenomena have had huge impact on the continent and its people. They

therefore constitute the meaning, effect and experience which most African writers like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie try to communicate to their readers. To do this, technique or manner which is the mediating principle between experience and the successful narrative product comes in. A work of fiction can only be said to be complete only when the author's experience has successfully been transformed into quality art.

It is in the clan of world class writers, who use manner to realise matter that we find Adichie *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Adichie's story mixes well with the manner of its presentation to create an organic whole. She follows the trend of social, economic, political and historical events in Nigeria, Africa and The United Kingdom as they affect the lives of individuals or characters. All these inform her artistic vision. Through the use of Igbo language and translation, Adichie promotes and expresses pride in African culture. In following closely the developmental trends in the lives of individuals in Nigeria, Europe and America, Adichie applies aspects of narrative technique in order to suit the demands of effect and meaning at different times including the period between 1967–1970 when the Nigerian Civil War took place. Here, she takes 'on the intimidating horror of Nigeria's civil war' (Achebe, 2006: Blurb). As Wainaina (2006) would put it:

We see how every person's belonging is contested in a new nation; find out that nobility of purpose has no currency in this contest; how powerfully we can love; how easily we can kill; how human we can be when a war dedicates itself to stripping our humanity from us (blurb).

It is, therefore, absolutely necessary to find out the extent to which Adichie has successfully manipulated form and manner – her fictional methods – to realise meaning, effect or manner in *Half of a Yellow Sun*.

Technique and Meaning

The *fabula* is the outline of incidents that make up a story. It is the content. The *suzet* is the form; narrative as selected, shaped and edited

by the conscious narrators themselves. In the *suzet*, the fiction writer is usually preoccupied by such details as:

Who tells the story? How much should the narrator know? How does he tell it? At what point should the story begin and at what point should it end? How far should motives be traced? What aspects of background are to be described and to what end? How is each character to be introduced and built up? (Agwu, 1993: 14)

This leads to the question of content (the subject matter) and form which is the art. Technique is the manner in which the experience of the fiction writer is catapulted to the destination of art. Schorer (1967:66) is of the view that in the absence of experience, all else in the work of art is the technique or manner. The implication of the above view is that all elements of fiction brought in in the course of presenting a story is technique. This further means that every story teller or writer possesses technique or manner. Schorer (1967: 66) goes further to narrow down the meaning of technique by proposing what he describes as the achieved content or form. This is experience transformed into art. Technique is, therefore, the linking chain between the raw narration (mere catalogue of events) and the refined appreciable narrative product which is presented to the reader. Schorer (1967) states that:

It is the means by which the writer's experience which is his subject matter compels him to attend to it; ... the only means he has of discovering, exploring, developing his subject, of conveying its meaning, and, finally of evaluating it (66).

Crankshaw (1976) sees technique as 'the means and skill with which [the writer] makes his matter tell' (4-5). 'Means' and 'skill' are used here to represent all the different narrative methods through which experience is rendered in fictional terms or the numerous ways through which a work of fiction is able to convey or reveal meaning or effect. These means or skills include irony, plot and fictional structure, symbolism, point of view, characterization, language, and so on. Technique is the skilful manoeuvring of these means or methods by a writer.

'La langue' is the language system, pattern or the language pool of any given speech community while 'parole' is the special way the

individual speaker in that speech community uses the linguistic elements or items chosen from the language system or language pool in order to achieve some specific or special private objectives. This relationship between 'la langue' and 'parole' (individual speaker's choice of linguistic items) is similar to the relationship existing between generally acceptable fictional methods or means such as point of view and so forth, and the technique (individual fiction writer's handling or manipulation of available narrative methods in order to achieve meaning).

Meaning on the other hand, refers to the ideas, subject matter, message, effect, impression, knowledge, experience, lesson, morals, and import which may be aesthetic, social, political, economic, psychological, historical, scientific, and so on which the fiction writer is able to convey to the reader through his manner or fictional method. Meaning therefore means what the author implies, suggests, hints at and insinuates by the way he chooses to arrange the point of view, and so on he adopts. This is because how an idea is presented determines the inference or meaning that would be drawn from it.

The meaning attached to the writer's manner depends on the situation surrounding it. Therefore, the situation, circumstance, context and surrounding events before, during or even after all help to determine the meaning attached to it. Meaning has four aspects. The first is sense; the denotative – something the writer is trying to put across. The second aspect is feeling – the writer's attitude towards this sense. This is followed by intention – the effect the writer consciously or unconsciously intends to produce through what is written and how they feel about it. The last is the attitude the writer takes towards the audience. A literary work may have up to four possible kinds of meaning. In some cases, even a word can be interpreted in different ways.

Scholes and Kellogg (1968: 68) sum it up that 'meaning derives from the difference between the apprehensible "real" world and the fictional world created by the fiction writer, and brought about or demonstrated by the help of his manner'. It is perhaps reasonable to assume that in

the course of writing a novel, the writer begins first by considering the message, theme or matter before selecting the means or the manner through which they hope to actualise the matter. A lot of subjectivity goes into this. There is intention, calculation and consciousness on the part of the fictional writer while manipulating the means and manner through which to achieve an explicit matter.

Schorer (1967: 66) is of the view that 'the writer capable of the most exacting scrutiny of his subject matter will produce works with thickness and resonance, works which reverberate, works with maximum meaning'. The above opinion is true because when the writer appreciates the fact that although the novel contains a picture of life, its contents go farther than just mere likeness. Agwu (1993) holds a similar view that, 'Thus far from being an exact transcript of life, the novel is a selection from life, a selection organised in pattern, and sifted by the essential laws of art to reveal the writer's vision of life' (11). Based on the above, the broad frames of reference for the novel are the life that the fiction writer copies or renders while the second is the way or manner by which the imitation of real life is achieved in a particular narrative work.

Since African literature is geared towards answering the historical, economic and political questions of the African continent beginning from the pre-colonial era, a lot of critical energy and expertise is rained on the extraction and analysis of the message or matter of a work of fiction and how it translates into the life of the African people. It should be 'Any work of art in which an African setting is authentically handled or to which experiences which originate in Africa are integral' (Nkosi, 1981: 9). For any criticism of the African novel to be successful, the critic needs to go into the internal structure of the novel, its formal constituents such as the point of view, and from there, progress outwards in order to identify the novel's position in the overall sociological, political and economic circumstances of the African experience – its referential quality.

Point of View in *Half of a Yellow Sun*

Point of view is the perspective or angle from which the narrator, often chosen by the writer, narrates the story. Booth (1970) argues that since the essence of analysing point of view is to reveal the connection between it and the writer's fictional objectives, the inherent traits of the narrative voice determines the nature and characteristics of the story presentation. According to Agwu:

It relates directly to the narrating act, to the triangular relationship between the author, the narrator... and the story subject. In terms of the narrator, it answers such questions as: Who tells the story? How does he tell it? And to what effect? (1993:30)

This implies that point of view affects the overall messages and themes of a work of fiction and that the type and experience of the narrator is a matter for very serious analysis (Friedman, 1967: 100). It is by means of point of view that such writers of fiction in the class of Adichie are able to reveal the way the values and attitudes, which form part of their artistic worlds should be considered and analysed.

This part of the study is going to look at Adichie's use of the omniscient narrator who serves as an all-knowing maker, not restricted to time, place or character, and free to move and to comment at will. Although the author assumes a detached position, this study shall attempt to locate meanings, effects or matter in the various instances of the omniscient narrator's perceived intrusion into the past and present activities, thoughts, feelings, and desires of such characters as Ugwu, Olanna, Odenigbo, Kainene, Richard and so forth who populate the world of *Half of a Yellow Sun*.

The author uses the omniscient narrator to reveal to the reader how the colonial masters and the world powers have continued to distort history and mastermind atrocities in their favour, and to the detriment of Nigerians and Africans. This she does through the point of Odenigbo's view on history:

'You know who really killed Lumumba?' Master said, looking up from a magazine. 'It was the Americans and the Belgians. It had nothing to do with Katanga'... 'You are my houseboy', Master said.

‘If I order you to go outside and beat a woman walking on the street with a stick... who is responsible for the wound, you or me?’(21)

The omniscient narrator observes with dismay that ‘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’ (23). He even discloses Ugwu’s secret wish that the so-called Mungo Park had not offended Master so much as to make him react with so much vehemence.

Adichie uses the omniscient narrator to further explore the misconceptions about the Igbo and Africans by the West. The reader is made to follow Richard on a fact-finding journey to Igbo-Ukwu, ‘the home of the roped pot’ (92). As Richard ignorantly enquires to know whether the burial chamber discovered during excavation by the archeologists was for the Igbo king, the omniscient narrator is used to put the Igbo history in proper perspective as the translator explains to Richard:

Pa said he thought you were among the white people who know something. He said the people of Igboland do not know what a king is. We have priests and elders. The burial place was maybe for a priest.... It is because the white man gave us warrant chiefs that foolish men are calling themselves king today...Richard apologised...the Igbos were said to be a republican tribe for thousands of years...but one of the articles about the Igbo-Ukwu findings had suggested that perhaps they once had kings and later deposed them (94).

From the foregoing, Adichie, no doubt does not take the issue of misconception about the Igbo race lying low.

Through the same omniscient narrator, Adichie’s audience is catapulted to the scene in Susan’s house in Lagos. Here, Susan, a Briton, drunk, indulges in idle gossip and unsubstantiated hearsay about the Igbo in particular and Nigerians in general. Hear her:

There are lots and lots of Igbo people here.... Very Jewish, really. And to think they are relatively uncivilized;... I remember somebody telling me when I first came to be careful about hiring an Igbo

houseboy because, before I knew it, he would own my house and the land it was built on. Another small whiskey? Richard shook his head... Her voice echoed... and worsened the splintering pain in his head (192).

The expression, 'I remember somebody telling me' erodes the authenticity of the above assertion. That she was apparently drunk explains her warped and twisted imagination, and that Richard declined her offer of whiskey, shows his disapproval and exception to the spurious commentary on a people she hardly knows. And for the fact that it worsens 'the pain in [Richard's] head after witnessing the massacre of the Igbo at the Kano airport, shows the extent to which Susan's reckless banter irks him. Adichie perhaps intends to expose how most people from the West, under some kind of influence ranging from alcohol, drug or simply racism pass ignorant judgements on Africans; assumptions that even fellow European sometimes disagree with.

The misconceptions which Adichie sets about to correct through the omniscient narrator is not limited to the Igbo but extends to all Nigerians in general. Through the eye-of-God narrative technique, the reader is introduced to the scene in which the newspaper articles published in London which misrepresents facts about the civil war in Nigeria annoys Richard:

The articles annoyed him. 'Ancient tribal hatreds' the *Herald* wrote, was the reason for the massacres. *Time* magazine titled its piece MAN MUST WHACK... but the writer had taken whack literally and gone on to explain that Nigerians were so prone to violence that they even wrote about the necessity of it on their passenger lorries... But there was a hollowness to all the accounts, an echo of unreality (205).

By the same token, the reaction of Richard, a Briton privy to first-hand information about the real situation, is made available to the reader. Bugged by the falsity of the English newspaper reports, 'Richard sent a terse letter off to *Time*. In Nigerian Pidgin English, he wrote, *whack* meant to eat' (205). He does not stop there. He writes about the war: the refugee problem displaced Nigerian Igbo belonging to different

spheres of life, the aim being to sound it loud and clear that 'The notion of the recent killings being the product of 'age-long' hatred is therefore misleading... 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' (206).

The fictional technique of making the reader see the above European misconceptions about Nigerians and the Igbo from the eyes of a British national is very remarkable. It underscores their intensity and validates their erasure. Perhaps Adichie's intention here is to prove that yellow journalism is not the exclusive preserve of developing nations; it could be found anywhere, even in Britain. The choice of Richard for the clean-up exercise is like using a pig to tidy up a pigsty. It makes the effort appear impressive and unusual and, therefore, more noteworthy. The issue of European misconceptions about Africans has continued to bug many African writers. Irked by a similar situation, Achebe wishes:

I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past with all its imperfections was not one long night of savagery from which the Europeans acting on God's behalf, salvaged them... (2008 :58).

The author passes comment on the overall colonial experience in Nigeria and Africa in general. For instance, the omniscient narrator is aware of the aimlessness of Richard Churchill's endeavour in Nigeria. According to Onukaogu and Onyerionwu:

He remains shy, self-conscious, and deficient of a proper sense of his own identify.... He cannot actualise the idea of family or nation... he is seized by Susan Granville-Pitts who forces him to repeat the nanny sequence all over again. Then he meets Kainene (2010:25).

The constant reference to Winston Churchill, the former British Prime Minister each time Richard is introduced to the other characters is a constant reminder of the involvement of the British colonial experience in Africa. Like Winston Churchill, representing the British government's activities in Africa, Richard Churchill's 'self-consciousness, deficiency, in defining a proper sense of his own identity' (25) points to the failure of

the colonial experience in Africa. Just as the British colonial administration did not know for sure what, in the positive sense, their mission in Africa had been, Richard sometimes wonders what Harrison, his houseboy would say if he should confess about the uncertainty of the subject of his writing. He had written sketches which he had discarded. They covered subjects ranging from archaeology, love story, to life in a small Nigerian town (97).

The indiscriminate exploitative and dehumanizing tendencies of neo-colonialism in Africa are further brought to the attention of the reader through the third person's narrative point of view. During an argument with Professor Ezeka, Odenigbo stresses the fact that Africans are being dehumanized in South Africa and Rhodesia; that the West 'fermented what happened in the Congo', and would not let either the American blacks or the Australian Aborigines vote. 'But the worst is what they are doing here... They are controlling us from behind drawn curtains. It is very dangerous' (141). The senselessness, incoherence, and aimlessness of colonialism and neo-colonialism in Africa is further brought home to the reader through Richard's stream of consciousness as he 'sipped his beer and wondered what Okeoma would think if he knew the truth – that even he [like the colonial masters] did not know whether it was a novel or not because the pages he had written [like colonialism] did not make any coherent whole' (141). Little wonder 'He started to crumple them page by page' just as colonialism destroyed and crumpled the economy and underdeveloped Africa from country to country 'until he had a jagged pile next to his dust bin' (141), something similar to the heap of crumbling economies in colonial Africa today.

The negative impact of colonialism is expressed further as the omniscient narrator opens to us the scene where Colonel Madu recounts his ordeal as he narrowly escaped being butchered in the North during the massacres. Adichie's narrator permits the reader to hear Madu blame the mutiny of 1966 in the Nigerian Army on the British Colonial Administrations ethnic balancing in the armed forces which polarized the army along ethnic lines. 'The problem was the ethnic balance policy. I ... told our GOC that it was polarizing the army... But

our GOC said no, our *British GOC*' (176). The omniscient narrator had witnessed every hidden detail of Olanna's Dark Swoops after she comes back from Kano where she had witnessed the massacre of her relatives and other Igbo. The narrator even sees friends and relatives come by 'to say *ndo* – sorry' (195), and informs the reader of 'other stories too, of how British academics at the University of Zaria encouraged the massacres and sent students out to incite the youths, how crowds at the Lagos motor parks had booed and taunted, 'Go, Igbo, go, so that garri will be cheaper!' (196). Adichie's all-seeing narrator also presents us with snatches of conversation during the celebration on the streets of Biafra, all blaming Britain for the Biafran woes:

'It is Russia you should blame, not Britain.'

'Definitely Britain. Our boys brought us some Nigerian shell cases from Nsukka sector for analysis. Every single one had UK WAR DEPARTMENT on it.'

'We keep intercepting British accents on their radio messages too (244).

Perhaps, Adichie's intention here is to debunk the exaggerated view of the positive colonial values in Nigeria or Africa. This she achieves by leaving the narration in the voice of an omnipresent narrator that is careful in selecting for presentation to the readers only those scenes that point to the snag about the colonial encounter in the past. According to Taiwo (1985):

It is important to learn about the past to which [Africans] make constant reference – a past which was almost wiped out by two important historical events, the slave trade and colonialism... They show the devastating effect of this contact on his culture, which has led to his present dilemma (29).

Adichie's concern is with the contemporary African situation, and through the omniscient narrator 'delves into the past only because otherwise it would be impossible to understand how the present came into being and what the trends are for the near future' (Rodney, 1972: 7). Through the all-seeing narrator, Adichie joins the vanguard of African novelists concerned with thorough examination and elucidation of

colonialism and neo-colonialism in order to formulate the strategy and tactics of Nigerian or African development. Orié (2011) could not agree more as he avers:

We write either to educate Africans and/or re-educate the whites... miffed and necessarily recalcitrant and demurral at the prejudiced way they have treated us; or to sensitise ourselves on how far we have come as a new independent continent (98).

Therefore, Adichie sets out to skilfully recollect our colonial past through a narrator's eye-of-God point of view as a way of either re-educating or sensitizing the readers on the dark side of colonialism and neo-colonialism.

Through the omniscient narrator, she calls attention to the injustice of the late 60's against the Igbo of Nigeria. The omniscient narrator presents the readers with an array of gory scenes of unmentionable war crimes. Anchored on *The Book: The World Was Silent When We Died*, the narrator chronicles the bombing of schools, markets, churches and even hospitals. He even hears, for the benefit of the readers, the sad and desperate lamentations on Radio Biafra on the complicity of world powers in the carnage and mass murder of the innocent Igbo:

The African states have fallen prey to the British-American imperialist conspiracy to use the committee's recommendations as a pretext for a massive arms support for their puppet and tottering neo-colonialist regime in Nigeria... (206).

He even sees Okeoma cast an apologetic glance at Olanna before painting a verbal picture of how his commander (a mercenary) drinks whiskey like water after which 'he throws girls on their backs in the open, where the men can see him and does them...' (335) or abuses them sexually. We are also told about how surprised Odenigbo's mother must have been when she is shot. The omnipresent narrator witnesses the mass execution of helpless civilians who are promised rice if only they 'would come out and say 'One Nigeria''. This they did but 'the vandals shot them, men, women, and children. Everyone' (463). And to drive the idea of genocide home, we are told emphatically that 'There is nobody left in the Njokamma family. Nobody left' (463).

The omniscient narrator witnesses the cold-blooded killing of Nnaemeka at the Kano airport; the soldiers as they ‘ran out to the tarmac and pulled out Igbo people who had already boarded and lined them up and shot them and left them there’ (153); the splitting open of pregnant women; and the spectacle of the mother carrying in a bowl the head of her murdered child as a memento. According to Onukaogu and Onyerionwu (2010):

The neurotic and psychotic motivations for the woman’s act of putting her dead baby’s head in a bowl would then tally with Olanna’s psychological devastation as occasioned by the pogrom, and on the other, with the several cases of shell-shocked victims going paranoid in the story (87).

In painting these horrifying spectacles of war, Adichie’s intention is perhaps to draw the attention of Nigerians, especially the younger ones, to the devastating effects of wars. This becomes necessary as the nation goes through various forms of political, military and economic upheavals that recently have included terrorism. By this token, those beating the drums of war and their eager dancers would be reminded that it is an ill wind that blows no one any good. This is in line with the regretful tone of Mene in Saro-Wiwa’s *Sozaboy* (1985) as he admonishes:

You will not know that war is foolish until you have fought inside it for some time and suffer very much as I have really suffered in this foolish terrible war that has separated me from my wife and mama (150).

Conclusion

In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, the technique of point of view takes up a pivotal position and transforms into a determiner of other fictional factors within the novel; and in fact, the nucleus of the matter, meaning or the message the author intends for the audience, the reader. The third person’s omniscient point of view has served as Adichie’s window into the Nigerian society as it grappled with first, the pogrom, and then, the resulting civil war. Her choice in this regard relates to her story telling

skills, to the tripartite connection involving the novelist, the narrating voice, and the themes, messages, meaning or matter. In this work of fiction, Adichie has successfully chosen an omniscient narrator thereby assuming an anonymous position, and the effect has been very fulfilling and rewarding.

In other words, Adichie's factorial voice has successfully chosen the relevant recipe for this fictional product and skilfully fashioned the combination and arrangement of the materials in the way the various characters have been ushered in and developed; the quality of the incidents and how they relate to one another; the complexion of the narrating tone; the layout of the stream of consciousness, and the manner of presenting symbols. At the end, each is in tandem with the all-seeing narrative voice. This project has been as convincing as it has been successful on account of Adichie's reluctance to interfere in the narrating act.

In summary, by means of the manner of omniscient point of view, Adichie has successfully revealed her artistic opinions and views of the values and attitudes which the imagined Nigerian society in the late 1960s during the civil war entails. The matter – her vision of the Nigerian society – is situated in various levels within the eye-of-God narrator's point of view. In this way, the manner makes the matter tell.

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