

**ECOCRITICAL READING OF CHIMAMANDA ADICHIE'S
HALF OF A YELLOW SUN AND AKACHIE EZEIGBO'S ROSES AND BULLETS**

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Abstract

War is an assertion of power through armed conflict between different countries or different groups within a country. It has proved itself to be an efficient tool of conquest and control and continues to do so even in recent times. Nations and communities have been plagued by war, civil wars and armed conflicts. Of these, many civil wars are a consequence of the political turbulence fashioned by the departing colonizers, an outcome of communal hatred especially in the third and fourth world countries, resulting in the destruction of the ecological makeup of the particular geographical region. Though, Eco-criticism as an interdisciplinary branch of academics, emerged in the Eurocentric circles to address the concern for nature and wilderness conservation, it failed to accommodate for a long time, the eco-critical concerns of the left developed nations. Hence a need for postcolonial eco-criticism emerged, that broadens the scope of understanding environment. The postcolonial eco-criticism considers the exploitation of environment as inclusive of abuse of both human and non-human elements. This paper highlights the human as well as non-human components of nature that are affected adversely in the postcolonial Nigeria by the Biafran War. The novels selected for scrutiny - Half of a Yellow Sun by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Roses and Bullets by Akachi Adeimora Ezeigbo - highlight the human-nature destruction that alarms the environment during the war. The paper also highlights how Adichie and Ezeigbo articulate their environmental concern even while critiquing the politics of war.

Key words: *eco-criticism, postcolonial eco-criticism, war, destruction, exploitation*

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Cheryl Glotfelty defines Eco-criticism as “the study of relationship between literature and physical environment.” (XVIII) Eco-criticism emerged as an interdisciplinary branch of literary studies that invited the anthropologists, literary critics and environmental activists for their intellectual contributions into the academics to broaden the perspective on environment and human culture. According to Lawrence Buell and Glotfelty, eco-criticism has been categorised into two waves of ideas. The first wave eco-criticism encouraged nature writing to raise awareness in regard to conserving nature. It pointed at human beings and the cultural and physical factors as responsible for environmental degradation. The second wave eco-criticism, brought into focus how race, class and gender hierarchies have been responsible for dilapidation of environment.

However these eco-critical waves failed to accommodate the environmental dispositions of postcolonial regions like Africa. Also, post-colonialism, a branch of literary study was found to be concerned only with human behaviours and their condition. Graham Huggans and Helen Tiffin, the renowned post-colonial thinkers, in their article “Greening Post-colonialism: Eco-critical Perspectives,” hint that an effective eco-criticism serves socio-political intent along with environment concerns. Adding to this argument, Ramachandra Guha in his article, “Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation: A Third World Critique,” emphasises that wilderness conservation, is a characteristic of American eco-criticism, and that it cannot sustain in third world situations. He further maintains that the socio-political milieu in the third world nations does not support an environmental practice based on Western framework. Postcolonial eco-criticism, points out the gap between Euro-American eco-critical theory and the third world realities, provides a platform for addressing the ecological issues of third world

countries like Nigeria. The eco-critical standpoint of saving and protecting wilderness fails when the Western nations that express concern over nature and its conservation on one hand, continue to execute neo-colonial power, by exploiting postcolonial nations. The manipulative control over the government of the third world nations and their resources such as minerals, oil fields, river deltas and the urban areas thus confirm environmental imperialism.

The socio-political trajectory of western intrusion into the spaces of former colonies like Nigeria can be understood by the shaping of socio-political milieu in this country. The haste with which the nation was created without considering the ethnic complexity and unequal distribution of resources, sowed the seeds of conflict in the region. After independence in 1960, the departing colonizers transferred administrative powers of control to the regressive Northern Nigeria, as against the politically active, progressive Southern Nigeria. This resulted in the debilitating governance in the region leading to the [ill] famous military coup in 1967. Finally the growing political-turned-ethnic tensions between the Northern and Eastern region led to Biafran War. This war underlined the power tussle in Nigeria. The aid from Russia and Britain, guaranteed uninterrupted flow of arms into the region, killing every human, animal and components of nature coming in its way. Nigeria emerged as a complex site of human-nature destruction, where the 'ecological imperialism,' as coined by Aldred Crosby, was palpable. This human-nature catastrophe can be observed in the literary canons in African context that have been recording the anthropocentric concerns, accentuating the impact of war on flora and fauna. Also to interrogate the Euro-American ecological understandings prevalent in the academic stream, post-colonial eco-criticism, emerged to address the exploitation prevalent in the third world nations. This paper highlights that human, non-human and land are conceivable parts of nature and exploitation of these elements is a concern to the environment.

In her article, "Reading and Writing the Ecosocial Environment," Julia Martin emphasises this concern of post-colonial eco-criticism. She considers the human component, animals, forests, waste, and the interdependence of these variables as determiners to African eco-criticism, especially in the war torn regions. Also, land of a

region becomes a major component of environment that gets affected during a war. Leopold Aldo, in his work *The Land Ethic*, elucidates the importance of land by mentioning that it's not merely plants and animals that get affected in a biotic community but also the land. Also, the bombing and shelling that lead to fire and smoke during the war, affect the air quality to a great extent. Taking the cue from Martin and Aldo, this paper investigates the post-colonial environment concerns as expressed in the two novels under scrutiny - Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* and Akachie Adeimora Ezeigbo's *Roses and Bullets* that are put under a post-colonial eco-critical scanner. The paper highlights how Adichie and Ezeigbo document the exhaustion of the biotic and abiotic components as a consequence of war. While among the biotic components - human, animals, plants, forests and waste shall be dealt with in the paper, the abiotic components shall comprise the land and the air that get affected due to war.

The title of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's narrative, *Half of a Yellow Sun* brings the topographical region into consideration i.e. Republic of Biafra of which flag bears the emblem of half rising sun, a symbol of hope in a war troubled region. The novel is a moving narrative on the ethnic tensions and political instability in Nigeria that leads to war, where a separate Biafran region is demanded by Igbos. It suggests that when war is inflicted upon a nation, it destroys both human and non-human components causing great concern to the environment. The narrative begins with the recruitment of Ugwu, a young houseboy at Odenigbo's home who is a revolutionary professor in the University of Nsukka. Olanna, daughter of a wealthy Nigerian chief loves Odenigbo and joins him in Nsukka. Kaienene, is the twin sister of Olanna and looks after the business of her father at Port Harcourt. She meets Richard, a British writer who lands in Nsukka for his project of writing a book on Nigerian art, they both fall in love. The novel is entirely set at the backdrop of war where it begins in the early sixties, progressing slowly with the advent of Biafran war and finally ends after the war ends in the early seventies. The novel unfolds the pain and sufferings and loss of the people and property in Nigeria who were better placed before the war.

Roses and Bullets is another fictional narrative that is based on Biafran war and reveals how future of people gets stunted by it. It is a love story of two students, Eloka and Ginika,

who are caught in the searing influence of war. Though Eloka and Ginika get married, they cannot live with each other as Eloka gets enlisted in the army. Ginika, who is forced to stay with her mother-in-law, gets frustrated by her cantankerous nature. She attempts to escape her and decides to go to a party where she is drugged and raped by another army officer. When she gets impregnated as a result of this rape, she is abandoned by her mother-in-law. She, later, gives birth to a dead foetus. Eloka abandons Ginika too, because she was pregnant for another man. Finally, Ginika loses both - her child and the love of her life. Though it seems an account of war on humanity, it also has dense references to the environmental destruction of the biotic and abiotic communities.

Both the novels though point at the social ills related to the war such as - displacement, corruption, rape and the like, it also consists of ecological accounts of human and non-human casualties leading to environmental concern. The war ensures the brutal destruction of mankind. Not only the soldiers involved in the war are killed but the common people and the dear ones become the targets during the bombings and shelling. The instance in *Roses and Bullets* where the human body becomes the site of encounter can be seen in context of Udo, a character in the narrative as follows:

Then the bedlam erupted as the shells began to rain down in the trenches, as if the machines and guns were guided by an unseen power. Each shell that exploded took lives with it. Cries of men rose and commingled with the sound of explosion. As Udo lay trembling calling on his mother, a solid but wet object fell on his back and rolled down beside him. With the gentlest of movements, he stretched his hand and touched it. He gave a stifled cry – it was a human head severed at the neck which still nestled in the steel helmet...Then he lost consciousness. (*RB* 438)

War inflicts casualties on animals equally. The animals not only become the targets of enemy bullets and bombs but also become the sites of the protein reserves. In case of protein malnutrition, these animals are slaughtered, as the supplies get affected during a war. This can be seen in the instance of Mama Adanna when the Odenigbo, Olanna, Baby and Ugwu visit Umuahia. The threat of Kwashiokor prompts Mama Adanna to kill Bingo, her dog, in order to meet her protein requirements during the war time:

“They ate Bingo,’ Baby said.

‘What?’

‘Adanna’s mummy ate Bingo.’...

‘Mama Adanna took the dog out some time ago and does not answer when they ask her where it is. And she has just cooked her soup with meat.’ (*HYS* 342)

The trees and forests are another biotic components that get affected during war. The air raids result into felling of trees or catching fire due to the bombings and explosions from the confronting party. This can be seen in the instance when the open air Awgu market in the Biafran region is suddenly bombed by the Nigerians, where trees are slit apart, as noticed by Richard and Kainene. Also another instance in the novel is when Ugwu is conscripted into the army. After his recruitment, Ugwu is trained to detonate bombs along with his fellow soldiers that results in burning of forest grass due to explosion of bombs as follows:

The vandals began to shell. There was first the whistle of a mortar in the air and then the boom as the mortar fell and hot shrapnel flew around. A patch of grass caught fire, lit up, and Ugwu saw a ferret by the cluster of trees ahead, hunched like a giant tortoise. (*HYS* 362)

Along with the biotic factors, the non-human components such as the land and air is affected by the war. The natural course and functions of the land in Biafra is disturbed due to the digging of trenches and burying of landmines which is evident in the narrative *Half of a Yellow Sun* when Ugwu hides himself in a trench to protect himself from the rapidly marching vandals. He also plants landmines in the land as follows:

In the trench, the earth felt like soaked bread. Ugwu lay still. A spider clambered up his arm but he did not slap it away...The moon floated out once in a while, and thick trees ahead became dimly outlined. The vandals were somewhere there. Ugwu hoped for a little more light; the moon had been more generous earlier when he buried his *obunigwe* about thirty yards ahead...and those vandals, those dirty cattle rearers,

would be confused and would have no idea that the *obunigwe* mines were waiting for them." (HYS 361-62)

The destroyed land stand as a memory reminding the affected about the feeling of loss. The land emerges as a wasteland, portraying the ruthless exploitation during war. It can be seen in the instance of Eloka, when he heads towards his home in the narrative as follows:

Eloka got up and walked out of the compound. He headed for his rose garden which had turned into wilderness. He stared at the tangle of weeds, thorns and roses. Eloka sighed. He had lost everything that made life worth living he thought. (RB 490)

During war, when a bomb explodes in one of the familiar topography that changes beyond recognition leaving indelible marks on the terrains and landmarks. This can be seen in the instance of Olanna's experience:

A bomb crater, wide enough to swallow a lorry, had split the road at the school entrance in two. The roof of the classroom block was crushed into a jumble of wood and metal and dust. Olanna did not recognise her room. All the windows were blown out, but the walls still stood. (HYS 279)

Air raids is a major contributor in a war leading to destruction of the buildings, infrastructural arrangements, destroying forests, animals and human beings. The aerial space is explored to ravage not only warfronts but also the civilian places, which becomes the sites for theatre of war, destroying all the possible biotic and abiotic components of nature. Ezeigbo depicts the aerial bombardment of a village as follows:

The explosions rocked the ground, assaulted the air again and again. Ginika heard anguished cries around her and held on to the tree. For a moment, she ventured to look up, and saw two jets turning directly overhead; they shone like silver, in the sun. In that instant, she saw one of them release some objects she could not identify; the objects fell from the rear end of the plane like the droppings of a goat. Could these be rockets or cannon balls. (RB 211)

Waste is another environmental concern in a war. Not only the biotic wastes raise an alarm on the environment but the abiotic waste also burdens the earth. Biotic factors such as dead bodies of human beings become a matter of concern in war ravaged topographies. This can be seen in the instance when Ugwu observes piled up dead bodies in the hospital as follows: 'Now, in the hospital where they had left him, he no longer wanted to die, but feared he would; there were so many bodies littered around him, on mats, on mattresses, on the bare floor. There was so much blood everywhere.' (HYS 393)

Also *Roses and Bullets* has a mention of such human debris as a consequence of the war. More number of dead bodies leads to undignified handling and disposal in the natural spaces. This can be seen in one such instance in the narrative:

An open carriage filled with human debris. Ginika saw severed hands and legs chopped, lying like pieces of wood on the floor of the carriage; there were dead bodies that were whole but with deep gashes in different places – the neck, chest and belly...Her eyes caught the figure of the woman lying naked, this embowelled; a dead foetus was hanging from her abdomen, it's umbilical cord still attached to the lifeless mother. (RB 166)

Not only the bullets and bombs are responsible for the waste creation in war ravaged countries, but the related protests and gatherings organized in response to it leads in waste creation. Things such as placards, effigies, paper documents and banners, after their use in the related marches/ exhibitions turn into abiotic waste contributing to pollution. This can be seen in the instance when Odenigbo observes the university campus getting transformed into a space of protest against the federal government and the related political situation: 'Students had gathered on the hockey field nearby, burning paper effigies of Gowon around a glowing bonfire; the smoke curled into the night air and mixed with their laughter and chatter (HYS 163).'

Thus the post-colonial eco-criticism moves from the earth centred concerns to the concern of human non-human components in postcolonial eco-critical context, where a reader can find roots of socio-political and economical interests of nations embedded in power equations shaping the same. It also reveals the historical nexus in the form of neo-

liberalism in the form of environmental imperialism that is responsible for both human and non-human exploitation in ecology.

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