

CREATING A NEW MULTICULTURAL FRAME: THE CINEMATOGRAPHIC
SUPPRESSION OF *HALF OF A YELLOW*

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ABSTRACT

In cinematic adaptations, the repression of most of the information in the source material can easily be misconstrued and quickly categorized as a result of the reductionist measures that cinematic adaptations of novels typically go through. I argue that in the case of the cinematic adaptation of Chimamanda Adichie's novel *Half of a Yellow Sun*, the suppression that pervades the production and the release of the film in Nigeria is more political than aesthetic. Not privileging literature over films, I reveal how the historical suppression of the Biafra story continues in the reduction of aspects of Adichie's depiction of the Biafran War in the cinematic adaptation of *Half of a Yellow Sun* by the film's producers, which perpetuates a tactical pattern of an incomplete representation that dates back to the Nigerian Civil War. The tenets and relevance of this project transcend Nigeria and its environs into a global landscape of discourses on war literature and its cinematic repression.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my industrious and loving mother, Mrs. Ibiwunmi Adedipe.

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Creating a New Multicultural Frame: The Cinematographic Suppression of *Half of a Yellow Sun*

Nigeria's troubled colonial past and its pre-independence politics resulted in a contentious political atmosphere in the decades after independence. This chaotic condition is evident in historical and creative works. John Stremlau in *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970* notes the difficulty of managing Nigeria's cultural diversity: "In the years following Independence, Nigeria's civilian leaders became increasingly embroiled in conflicts resulting from their attempts to consolidate national authority over some 250 linguistically distinct groups" (4). The cultural heterogeneity and the diversity of Nigeria had become problematic long before its independence. During the colonial era, Sir Frederick Lugard, Governor-General of Nigeria from 1914 to 1919, united the Southern and Northern protectorates of Nigeria for administrative convenience. He did not envisage the discovery of an abundance of natural resources by the country after independence. The unnatural union of communities that speak different languages and practise different religions laid the foundation for a battle that is later represented in the literary scene.

The partition of Africa in the 19th century and the subsequent colonization of the continent by Britain, France, Belgium, Germany, Spain, and Portugal had laid the foundation for the politics of repression, the practice of erasing or hiding certain historical conflicts or dissent in the name of national peace and good order. The amalgamation of various ethnic groups in Nigeria in 1914 generated many problems. Within a few years after Nigerian independence in 1960, tribal rivalries and fierce battles for supremacy degenerated into the Nigerian Civil War, otherwise known as the Biafran War. This war was a major consequence of the post-independence disharmony across the African continent. The forced unification of arbitrarily constructed African countries resulted in the fight for the control of natural resources like gold,

diamonds, and crude oil. Nick Tembo in “Ethnic Conflict and the Politics of Greed: Rethinking Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*” suggests that ethnic heterogeneity and disharmony combine disastrously with economic inequality: “ethnic cleavages have the power to run the nation aground when people, often from one ethnic group are given an advantage and enjoy the privilege of exercising greater control over a nation’s resources at the expense of other tribal groupings within the country” (184). It is this perceived advantage by some ethnic groups that motivated the call for secession of the Eastern part of Nigeria. Subsequently, the repression of Biafra ensues in order to avoid the likely secession by the East.

When the Eastern part of the country attempted to secede by force, the Nigerian Civil War started in 1967 and ended in 1970. After the assassination of General Agwui Ironsi in 1966, what would form the Biafra story started. The key event that laid the foundation for the Biafra story is captured by J. De St Jorre in his historical study, *The Nigerian Civil War*: “A little before midnight on Thursday, 28th July 1966, while Ironsi was still on tour of the Federation, a group of armed Northern Subalterns strode into the officers’ mess in Abeokuta barracks and shot their garrison commander and two other senior Ibo officers dead” (68). This assassination of an Igbo general in the Nigerian army shifted military power to the North. To break away from Britain and its Northern ally, the Nigerian Civil War started in 1967. In the three years of the war, many lives were lost due to the inability of the government and secessionists to reach a compromise. To be free from the shackles of colonialism and the indiscriminate partition of Africa, the secession of Biafra from Nigeria was an important point in Africa’s fight against colonialism and neocolonialism. Susan Strehle in “Producing Exile: Diasporic Vision in Adichie's ‘Half of a Yellow Sun,’” establishes the historical exploitative relationship between Nigeria and Britain: “*Half of a Yellow Sun* places Nigeria in historical context as a nation created in Europe, by

Europeans, for European profit, and infused with European ideological commitment to the nation as an emblem of popular unity” (654-655). It is this perceived exploitation and economic domination that made it imperative for secessionists to forge a new path. Stanley Diamond in “Who Killed Biafra?” argues that Britain, Nigeria’s former colonial masters were culpable for Nigeria’s ethnic struggles and the repression of Biafra:

If we fail, the white man, who has been so surprised by our movement, the white man, who has entirely miscalculated every facet of this struggle, will have garnered a new range of knowledge about the potential of the black man and prepared himself to combat us should we ever again rear our ugly head. We owe it, therefore, to Africa not to fail. Africa needs a Biafra. Biafra is the breaking of the chains. (340)

There is a constant interrogation by the masses and scholars of who is really controlling political affairs on the African continent. The continued influence of Britain on its former colonies has made many political analysts like Stanley Diamond indict European colonizers for their continued meddling with colonized lands. It is important to consider Diamond’s statement as an argument for the African significance of the task to totally decolonize Nigeria.

To understand the nuances of the battles of suppression that pervade the Biafra story, it is imperative to know what defines Nigerian Civil War literature. More widely considered, Nigerian war literature shows the wartime travails of common citizens. The Biafra war story forms most of the Nigerian war narratives and it is the only civil war narrative. The other Nigerian war narratives are documented as subplots of novels and in oral forms. The story of the Ife-Modakeke war, an oral tribal war story of the communal war between Ife people and Egba migrants from the Southern part of the Yoruba land, stories of the adventure of Are-Ona-Kankafé in Western Nigeria, and the Jihad war in the Northern part of the country are some of the war narratives under-represented in

the literary sphere. Chinua Achebe in his classic novel *Things Fall Apart* represents earlier communal wars amongst Igbo communities. It is important to note that most of these early communal wars were based on land acquisition and migration. Nigerian War literature is interesting for its representation and struggles with complex heterogeneity. Chidi Amuta gives a comprehensive definition of the constituent features of Nigerian Civil War literature:

As a body of historically conditioned literature, Nigerian Civil War literature acquires distinctiveness both at the level of theme and technique. In terms of theme(s), the literature in question raises fundamental questions about the society that preceded the war and those values which made the war inevitable in the first place. These questions center around the problem of elite leadership, inter-class and intra-class relationships, ethnic heterogeneity, external involvement in the war as well as the state of private and public morality in a war situation. (87)

Any Nigerian Civil War literary piece from the onset is born into a political tension that is destined to be repressed by opposing political forces. Its acceptance by the masses is dependent on the ethnic group they belong to and the political sentiments they share. Conversely, on the part of the government, its acceptance is dependent on how it has been able to hide historical facts for the fear of bringing back wartime sentiments. An aftermath of the war was the documentation of the travails of people during the war. In the literary sphere, the agony of this period has been recorded by many Nigerian writers. Chinua Achebe's *Girls at War and Other Stories* (1972), Elechi Amadi's *Sunset in Biafra* (1973), Chukwuemeka Ike's *Sunset at Dawn* (1976), and Buchi Emecheta's *Destination Biafra* (1982) all narrate the tale of the Nigerian Civil War. More recently, Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation* (2005) add to the Biafra narrative. While these narratives on Biafra give account of the Nigerian Civil War, none of them have been

able to capture readers' interest like Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006). The historical limitation of the Nigerian Civil War was one of the measures taken by the Nigerian government after the war. Thirty-nine years later, the suppression of the Biafra story took a new form. This suppression can be seen in the cinematic adaptation of *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Today, fifty-one years after the war's beginning, the Biafra discourse continues to generate significant interest. The historical suppression of the Biafra story in public schools, the literary euphemism that pervades the Biafra narrative, and the government's suppression of persistent secessionist groups like the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) provokes a reevaluation of the literary and political discourses around Biafra.¹ The political division and resentment that existed since the beginning of the Biafra War continue till today.

In the cinematic adaptation of *Half of a Yellow Sun*, the absence of more than a hundred minority peoples, the absence of the mutilation of women and children during the war, and the absence of cannibalism point to the repression of history within the film. The total absence of these elements and the removal of the scene of the Kano massacre on the insistence of the government show there is a deliberate political repression of history in the movie. I analyze evidence that shows that the cinematic version of Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* was censored for political reasons. I explore discourses that show that there can be a political motive in the reductionist process of adapting a literary work into a movie. I argue in this paper

¹ The members of these secessionist groups have been killed, incarcerated and silenced by the Nigerian government. See www.ipob.org for more information on issues surrounding the repression of the activities of IPOB.

that suppression is ultimately political. I explore the suppression in the cinematographic version of the novel *Half of a Yellow Sun*, which is due to the rigors of the cinematic adaptation of novels, censorship, and politics. Suppression in this essay means the deliberate exclusion of certain events and an attempt to obliterate the Biafra story. This suppression is an attempt to euphemize the gory story of the Nigerian Civil War.

Adichie's Contribution to the Biafran War Discourse

The Biafra story is part of the large body of African war literature and postcolonial narratives. The transfer of social reality into fiction is a common phenomenon in the African literary sphere. Colonial and postcolonial discourses inform much of these fictions. There is a link between Africa's colonial experience and its neocolonial/postcolonial experience. The latter is the perpetuation of colonial domination under the guise of freedom, independence, and total sovereignty of African states.² The suppression that pervades the Biafra narrative is evident in one of the earliest narratives of the Biafra story: Buchi Emecheta's *Destination Biafra* is one of those narratives that went through some questionable reductive process before its publication. It is a novel by one of Nigeria's best female writers. According to Robert Berner, "In a foreword, Emecheta tells us that her publisher was forced by high production costs to reduce the [...] manuscript of *Destination Biafra* by half. This may account for what often seems a rather elliptical narrative [...] which too often blunts the novel's satiric edge" (160). The cost of production of a book could never have been a genuine excuse to reduce the volume of a work of historical fiction, which has the potential of healing a disgruntled group or spurring them into renewed violence. Another account of this kind of suppression was given by Chikwenye Okonjo

² See Walter Rodney's *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1972)

Ogunyemi, who affirms that "...Emecheta claims that the original first part of *Destination Biafra* [...] disappeared mysteriously while the manuscript was with the editor. The manuscript must have posed a serious threat to whoever effected this sabotage" (262). The censorship of Emecheta's *Destination Biafra* is part of the suppression of the Biafra story. This pattern of suppression is later seen in the cinematic adaptation of *Half of a Yellow Sun*. In Omar Sougou's *Writing Across Cultures: Gender Politics and Difference in the Fiction of Buchi Emecheta*, he suggests that publishers have the power to shape the content of a creative work: "The profile of this community of readers is primarily defined by the text-producer, but it may also be predetermined by publishers in some cases" (60). The limitations that Emecheta encountered in the hands of her publishers ensures that her Biafra story is not fully told. As a London based Nigerian writer, there was little she could do to fight the repression of her creative work by the British publishers. The awareness of the calculated suppression of Emecheta's Biafra story by Adichie prepared her to tactically tell her story of the Biafran genocide. According to Joya Uraizee in "Fragmented Borders and Female Boundary Markers in Buchi Emecheta's 'Destination Biafra,'" Emecheta's narration reveals that Nigeria is far from total sovereignty and political harmony amongst its various ethnic groups: "The novel suggests that independence has brought Nigeria not peace and prosperity, but neo-imperialism, political corruption, and genocide" (Uraizee 17). The reading of *Destination Biafra*, a novel published three decades before *Half of a Yellow Sun* shows a consistent censorship of the Biafra story.

Both Adichie and Emecheta also use similar characters to show the awkward relationship between Nigeria and its former colonial masters, Britain. The love affair between Alan Grey and Debbie in *Destination Biafra* is an epitome of the neocolonialist relationship between Nigeria and its former colonizer. In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Adichie borrows from the wisdom of Emecheta

by presenting Olanna and Richard Churchill, who function as two independent people in a balanced relationship. Both Adichie and Emecheta tackle the conditions that caused the Nigerian Civil War. Through their protagonists, they relive the suffering of women and children during the war. They also share the sentiments of many affected during the war, who wanted the war to stop. In *Destination Biafra*, Chief Odumosu admonishes Debbie, “Don’t meddle in things bigger than you and don’t forget, my dear that you are a woman. That is why we are giving you this delicate mission” (Emecheta 123). The quest to stop the war led to further misery for her. Emecheta through Debbie demystifies the violence against women during the war. Through the presentation of strong independent women, who both refuse the domination of their British lovers, the writers reject colonial oppression. With an emphatic rejection of Alan’s proposal, Debbie bids him farewell: “Goodbye, Alan. I don’t mind your being my male concubine, but Africa will never again stoop to being your wife; to meet you on an equal basis, like companions, yes, but never again to be your slave” (Emecheta 245). In a similar fashion, Adichie portrays the relationship between Richard and Kainene as inharmonious: “He felt a similar physical pain when he desired her, and he would dream about being inside her, thrusting as deep as he could, to try and discover something that he knew he never would” (65). All this shows the writers’ refusal of colonial domination and oppression.

In an audacious attempt to perpetuate the Biafra story after years of suppression, Chimamanda Adichie serves as the new voice of Biafra. Her account of the Nigerian Civil War is a continuation of the Biafra story. The first accounts of the war were recorded by newspaper articles, interviews, and memoirs. These documents show a suppression of the events that led to the war and the facts that surrounded the war. Adichie uses newspaper reports to show that the Biafra story has been suppressed right from the onset. In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Richard makes

this observation about the misrepresentation of the cause of the Nigerian Civil War in British Journals:

The articles annoyed him. “Ancient tribal hatreds,” the *Herald* wrote was the reason for the massacres. *Time* magazine titled its piece MAN MUST WHACK, an expression printed on a Nigerian lorry, but the writer had taken whack literally and gone on to explain that Nigerians were so naturally prone to violence that they even wrote it on their passenger lorries. (Adichie 208)

The novel, through Richard, deprecates this attempt by the British press to demonize Nigerians. The comical captions highlight how the press’s portrayal misrepresents the war. Adichie adds to the Biafra story to balance the lopsidedness that is existent in Biafra narratives.

Equally important, the subplot “The Book: The World Was Silent When We Died” in *Half of a Yellow Sun* functions as a means of coding information that could have easily been suppressed by the government or its collaborators. This secondary plot also functions as means of ensuring a form of objectivity and an impersonal stance. In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Adichie uses Ugwu to achieve this impersonal stance. This nested narration by Adichie demystifies the Biafran genocide. This part of Adichie’s narration passes a message that the underlying factors that caused the Biafran War are still in existence. Adichie also uses Richard as a voice of Biafra to the outside world. Here, the reader gets a western perspective of the Nigerian Civil War and Richard’s unique opinions. He hints at the culpability of the British government in the Biafra war in his article embedded in Adichie’s narration:

It is imperative to remember that the first time the Igbo people were massacred, albeit on a much smaller scale than what has recently occurred, was in 1945. That carnage was precipitated by the British colonial government when it blamed the Igbo people for the

national strike, banned Igbo-published newspapers, and [...] encouraged anti-Igbo sentiment. (166)

In this section of *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Richard asserts that Nigeria's former colonizers played some part in the repression of the Nigerian Civil War. Adichie conceals key historical facts in *Half of a Yellow Sun* through a subplot that is politically charged. The awareness of the suppression of the Biafra story justifies the concealment of the most important plot in the novel under Ugwu's narration in "The Book: The World Was Silent When We Died." The title of this nested narration itself suggests a genocide and the unjust killing of the Igbos during the Biafran War. In this secondary plot, Ugwu creates a link between the Biafran genocide, the Rwandan genocide and the Jewish Holocaust, but the narrator cautions his interlocutor "[to be] careful not to draw parallels" (Adichie 82). In this part of the narration, the reader can get a vivid picture of the agony and the atrocities of war. Through writing that becomes lyrical but harshly graphic, the reader shares the pain and commotion of people under genocide. The narrator condemns this inhumane act by making its historical occurrence painfully real, in opposition to the silence that pervades the years of the Nigerian Civil War and post-war era. Moving away from her prose, Ugwu paints the gory picture of starved and dying children in Ugwu's poem, "Were you Silent when we Died":

Did you see photos in sixty-eight
of children with their hair becoming rust:
Sickly patches nestled on those small heads,
Then falling off, like rotten leaves on dust? (375)

The incorporation of poetry in her narration and the digressive technique of switching to a subplot throughout her narration effectively serves as an alternate story that balances other Biafra

stories. This ensures that her Biafra story is fully communicated.³ The nested book excerpts create an undiluted objectivity. Through divergent means and voices, Adichie distances herself from her work. This impersonal stance adds more credibility to her narration.

Adichie came out to vehemently speak for the continuation of the Biafra story. There is a need for the reawakening of Biafrans, who have been condemned to the status of second-class citizens in their own land. Taiwo Bello in his review of the book, “Writing the Nigerian-Biafra War,” notes “the incorporation of a full section on the roles of Biafra women during the war, [...] as most literature on the topic is dominated by the experiences of male soldiers who fought in the war, thereby ignoring the important roles played by women” (325). Bello’s observation shows a gender repression in Biafra discourse. This repression is presently being demystified by many scholars. Adichie gives women a voice through characters such as Olanna and Kainene, who represent the dynamism of women during the war. These women negotiated improved condition for themselves and those around them throughout the war. Abioseh Porter notes in “They Were There, Too: Women and the Civil War(s) in Destination Biafra” “that some of the most celebrated attempts to discuss works dealing with the Nigeria-Biafra civil war—one of the predominant themes of modern African literature—have either ignored or underestimated the literary efforts of female writers” (Abioseh 313). Conscious of the silencing that pervades the Biafra story and the Nigerian literary sphere, Adichie fights this suppression with her literary ingenuity.

As revealing as *Half of a Yellow Sun* is, the novel shows that there is no place for ethnic minorities in Biafra. It is important to examine the exclusion of minorities in the imagined Biafra because of the recent emergence of parallel secessionist groups from the old Eastern Nigeria. Due to a repression of Eastern minorities that perpetuates itself for too long, we now have several

³ See *The Danger of a Single Story* at TEDGlobal 2009.

secessionist groups from the region. Meredith Coffey in “Ethnic Minorities and the Biafran National Imaginary in Chukwuemeka Ike’s *Sunset at Dawn* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun*” suggests that hundreds of minority groups are underrepresented in Adichie’s Biafra Story: “In the context of this inclusive vision, the novels’ cautious approach to dealing with ethnic minority characters is particularly striking. [...] *Sunset at Dawn* and *Half of a Yellow Sun* each explicitly raise the question of eastern minorities’ inclusion without ever resolving it comfortably” (267). Coffey’s argument gives the clue as to why several minorities in the imagined Biafra now agitate for a sovereign state. Adichie continues in the footsteps of Achebe, who successfully traversed ethnic and political barriers to push his Biafra story. It is necessary to continue a legacy that transcends political boundaries. In the post-civil war era, the Biafra story completely transmuted into an Igbo agitation. This is due to the suppression of ethnic minorities in the East, and the emergence of other secessionist forces amongst the minorities in the old imagined Biafra. The recent emergence of the Indigenous Peoples of Biafra, which is pro-Igbo, shows that Biafra is disintegrating after years of suppression. Fifty-one years after the start of the Biafra war, ethnic minorities now seek their own unique voice. They also agitate for their own sovereignty and seek to secede with organizations such as Niger Delta Avengers, Reformed Egbesu Boys of the Niger Delta, and Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta.⁴ Most of these movements constantly retreat in the face of fierce battles and demonization by the federal government, which has led to them being labeled as terrorist groups. The attack on these

⁴ New secessionist forces coming out from amongst ethnic minorities of the imagined Biafra.

secessionist forces has led to the killing of innocent citizens in some Niger-delta villages.⁵ Ethnic minorities in imagined Biafra are very important to the Biafra story and its repression. The consistent suppression of Biafra has led to the reduction of the group and its representation to an Igbo struggle.

In addition, the importance of a historical context to a discourse that has lots of historical links is suggested by Mariama Bâ, who asserts in *The Political Function of Written African Literatures*: “One can see, therefore, the importance of historical context for the emergence of written African literature. From then on, the role of the African writer can only be that of a freedom fighter” (413). Reflecting on Bâ’s assertion, one can call Adichie a freedom fighter who is forced to take a political stance in her narration. The politics of the war is so complex that it is imperative to be objective in conversations about the war. Chitra Nair in “Negotiation of Socio-Ethnic Spaces: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun* as a Testimonio of African National and Ethnic Identity” notes that “Drawing inspiration from the literature on Biafra, Adichie successfully explores the tribal disputes involved against the background of the national history of Nigeria, and how the character struggle with the issues of love, class, race, family, and profession in the shadow of war” (204). Nair’s argument focuses on the preoccupation of the third generation of postcolonial African writers with ethnicity and identity issues. She explores how Chimamanda Adichie’s *Half of Yellow Sun* negotiates an ethnic space for the Igbo tribe in the South-eastern part of Nigeria after the civil war (203). African female writers take it upon themselves to change the status quo. This is the reason why Mariama Bâ asserts in her politically

⁵ See https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Urgent_Action/apic_122399.html for information on the Odi massacre in 1999 by the Olusegun Obasanjo government.

charged discourse, *The Political Function of Written African Literatures* that “The African woman writer has a special mission, given that the African social context is marked by glaring gender inequalities, exploitation, and ageless barbaric oppression of the so-called weaker sex” (415). It became imperative to change a disadvantaged position into an advantageous one. The historical narration of the Nigerian Civil War reveals constant suppressions from all angles. The government, separatist movements, writers, and Nigerians, in general, have all been involved in a complex political suppression of minorities; women and ethnic minorities have all been on the receiving end. This suppression is most evident in the cinematic adaptation of *Half of a Yellow Sun*.

Adaptation Theory and the Politics of Reductionist Measures in the Cinematic Adaptation of *Half of a Yellow Sun*

The cinematic adaptation of *Half of a Yellow Sun* was directed by Biyi Bandele (a British trained director) and produced by Andrea Calderwood and Gail Egan, who are British filmmakers. For a film that was released in 2014, its poor quality and poor performance in theaters is a testament that there are several missing elements in the film. These missing elements I argue are part of the suppression of the Biafra story.⁶ The cinematographic suppression of *Half of a Yellow Sun* can be observed in the euphemism and suppression that are evident in certain scenes in the movie. The censorship of the movie by the Nigerian Video and Films Censors Board compelled the producers of the movie to erase some aspects of the film that represents the evil of the Biafran War. This suppression was done after the initial release of the film at the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF).⁷ Of interest is the removal of the scene of the Kano massacre.

⁶ See the movies *Tears of the Sun* (2003), *Hotel Rwanda* (2004), *Blood Diamond* (2006) and *Beasts of No Nation* (2015) for the way they depict ethnic wars in Africa.

⁷ The film received positive reviews at the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF).

It is imperative to carefully navigate the realm of adaptation to arrive at the political suppression of the cinematic adaptation of *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Unraveling the fallacies of adaptation theory can be quite tricky because of stereotypes and lack of respect for films. A cinematic adaptation of a novel is a unique material that needs to be analyzed for its own production and meaning. The cinematic adaptation of Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* needs to be judged as a unique material before the analysis of its repression. Books and essays on adaptation consistently address the issue of fidelity and how it has been placed ahead of the criticism of adaptations and original texts as two different creative works that should be judged independently. "Thomas Leitch's Twelve Fallacies in Contemporary Adaptation Theory" addresses the many misconceptions of adaptation theory. Leitch notes that adaptation theory has remained on the sidelines in film study because it has not been taken seriously. The first of the fallacies that he analyzes is that there is no such thing as contemporary adaptation theory. His assertion is based on the fact that many questions remain unanswered in the theory of adaptation. He asked the question of what film adaptations adapt, and how the relationship between adaptation and the text it is explicitly adapting compared to its intertextual relationships with other texts (150). He further asserts that the degradation of adaptation theory is prevalent because of the elevation of literature above cinema and the privileging of high culture above mass culture (150). One would resist the temptation of taking the reductionist elements of the film out of context. The assumption that novels are better than films would be put aside. Due to a long history of the suppression of the Biafra story and the political suppression of the film I argue in favor of the political repression of the cinematic adaptation of *Half of a Yellow Sun*. The struggle of cinematic adaptations is evident in Linda Hutcheon's theoretical explanation of the political suppression in the cinematic adaptation of novels. Linda Hutcheon cites Linda Seger's "*The Art*

of Adaptation: Turning Fact and Fiction into Film [where she] calls devices like voice-over disruptive (1992:25) for they make us focus on the words we are hearing and not on the action we are seeing” (54). She further notes the subjectivity and politics that pervade cinematic adaptations: “It is obvious that adapters must have their own personal reasons for deciding first to do an adaptation and then choosing which adapted work and what medium to do it in. They not only interpret that work but in so doing they also take a position on it” (92). The suppression of key events is inevitable once a writer or screenwriter fails to be apolitical.

In fiction and cinematic adaptation, one can observe that fiction is often a reflection of social experience, and the cinematic adaptation of a novel ensures the progression of the transfer of social realities into a film. During the process of this transfer, the complexity of the political play of both the writer and the characters comes to play: “In general terms, this impressive literary output can be attributed to the fact that social experience is the primary source of literature” (Amuta 85). This transfer of social experience is not usually totally represented: “Therefore, the argument goes, film can show us characters experiencing and thinking, but can never reveal their experiences or thoughts, except through that ‘literary’ device of the voice-over” (Hutcheon 58). This shows that the limitations and reductionist measures in fictions and adaptations are intertwined with the author’s subjectivity and political views. The origin and gender of the author are important. For Adichie, being an Igbo woman ensures that her Biafra story balances the Biafra stories of male writers. Cynthia Wallace asserts in her book *Of Women Borne* that, “*Half of a Yellow Sun* corrects the single story by challenging a widely reproduced single image from the Biafran war, which it recounts, and by breaking a silence brought about by the erasure of history” (197). The significance of this kind of narration is that an alternate social view is being offered. Linda Hutcheon asserts that “An adaptation can obviously be used to

engage in a larger social or cultural critique. It can be used to avoid it, of course...” (94). Both the author and the government prioritize the need to take a political stance because of varying interests and diversity. In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, ethnic diversity makes everybody conscious of affiliations and the historical representation of events that threatens political power.

The use of voice-over in the cinematic adaptation of *Half of a Yellow Sun* is one of the measures used to incorporate Nigeria’s history in the film. The first scene of the movie intimates the viewers of Nigeria’s independence celebration, but fails to adequately capture the events that led to Nigeria’s independence. As a production technique that is supposed to capture vital elements that are not part of a dialogue in the film, it fails to function as an aesthetic addition to the film. Not only do we not get most of the salient messages of the source material in Adichie’s nested narration, it fails to articulate a distinct function of a film about war and genocide. Its passive reference to history fails to capture the political play during the war and after the war. Other films about genocide in Africa like *Tears of the Sun* (2003) and *Hotel Rwanda* (2004) vividly capture key political and historical events in the film. These films were made before the cinematic adaptation of *Half of a Yellow Sun*. One would expect that in a film industry with lots of history to learn from, the screenwriter and the producers of the film would borrow from the effective use of dialogues in these films about genocide. The failure of the film’s producers to build on the invaluable precedence of other films and criticism suggests a deliberate suppression of certain elements of the film.

The cinematic adaptation of *Half of a Yellow Sun* is much more different than the novel both in terms of content and message. It features some of Hollywood’s big names like John Boyega who acted as Ugwu and Thandie Newton who acted as Olanna. The movie gives an account of Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun* by adding a little bit of documentary and suppressing much of the

information in the novel. In the movie, Ugwu takes on a new role as a minor character, a lesser role than the role of a narrator that he played in the novel. Time, sequencing, and continuation are used differently in the movie to make it more adaptable to screen. The use of a documentary at regular intervals in the film gives the viewer the belief that a historical account is being told. The use of local language, characters, and politics were suppressed in the film. One of the significant differences between *Half of a Yellow Sun* and its cinematic adaptation is the absence of a subplot in the latter. This absence makes Ugwu to lose his voice and his role as a principal character in the film. From the position of a primary character that dictates the logical progression of the novel, he becomes a passive character in the film. “The Book: The World Was Silent When We Died,” which is embedded in Adichie’s narration is lost in the film. The interrogation here is not that of fidelity to the source material, but that of suppression that pervades the production of the film. For a story that portrays the gory condition of Biafrans, the film does not compel its viewers to be empathic. The reference to the occurrence of genocide in other countries, and the universality of the condition of Biafrans that is in “The Book: The World Was Silent When We Died” was lost in the film. The film lost its visual power to portray chronic starvations, cannibalism, rape, decapitation, the killing of children, and the role of child soldiers by presenting to us a medium that does little to make us relive the agony of the Biafran War. The cinematic adaptation of *Half of Yellow Sun* fails to emphatically allot culpability. We do not get the name of a potential villain responsible for massacres and oppression. In the novel, the nested narrative of Ugwu presents some of the passive and active collaborators of Nigeria against Biafra. While the war is going on, we do not get what is happening in other places in the imagined Biafra. Everything is domesticated. The viewers do not get to see a war front. One does not also get to see how the war changed people’s day-to-day living. For a film that was released in 2014, it does a bad job of using maps. In the

scene that shows the arrival of Olanna in Kano, the producers try to cover up for their lack of creativity by using a map to indicate to the viewer that she is now in the Northern part of the country. A striking visual element like a tall minaret in the middle of the city or a group of people dressed in Jalamias can effectively indicate the arrival of the protagonist in a city where the predominant religion is Islam. This act is a suppression of the Islamic religion, its followers and the role of religious disparities that fueled the Kano massacre.

The absence from the film of key characters like the head of the Nigerian army and head of state, General Yakubu Gowon, removes the potential of a hook and a formidable villain. This absence not only affects the aesthetic aspect of the film, it serves as evidence of repression. Another key character that is missing from the film is a child soldier named High-tech. His absence is not significant as a comparison to the novel, but significant because it serves as a means of silencing of child-soldiers. This thirteen-year-old soldier in Adichie's narration reveals the abuse of many children during the Biafran war. These children are recruited by the Biafran army from an early age due to the shortage of trained soldiers.

Furthermore, the Nigerian government worked assiduously to ensure that the link between the contemporary experience of youths with agonizing and war-plagued past of the country is not established. One would agree that "Opening the past cinematically creates the potential to relive that past, at least imaginatively, and these heritage films performed their cultural work in the present through their tacit interpellations of their audience into the mores of the nation's past" (Pugh 113). For obvious reasons, the government wanted to hide their own misdeeds during the war. They are contented with the hypocrisy and pretense that surrounds the documentation of the Biafran War. They don't want the present generation to relive the gory events of the Biafra War. It is for this political repression that Adichie decided to be a voice of

the Biafra story in the first place. Years back, General G. Odumegwu Ojukwu in his account of the war suggested that the actualization of the secession of Biafra is threatened both internally and externally: “In an address to a joint session of the Advisory Council of Chiefs and Elders and the Consultative Assembly on October 11, 1967, General G. Odumegwu Ojukwu states, “Our very existence is being threatened by both external and internal foes. Of the two the latter is the more dangerous because they are within and around us” (211). The external political force that Ojukwu was talking about is Nigeria’s former colonial masters. The involvement of Britain in the suppression of the Biafra story is also vividly represented in Adichie’s narration. To make matters worse for Biafra enthusiast, the job of the cinematic adaptation of the novel was contracted to Biyi Bandele, a Nigerian, British-trained writer and filmmaker. His theatrical adaptation of *Things Fall Apart*, a novel written by Adichie’s godfather, Chinua Achebe made Bandele a natural selection for the job. Oblivious of his British influences, and collaboration with British film production outlets, the suppression of the Biafra story in *Half of a Yellow Sun* already started long before its final confrontation with the Nigerian Video and Film Censors Board.

In addition, the culpability of government in the Biafran War did not remain hidden for too long. The more they repressed the Biafra story through its cinematic adaptation, the more it becomes obvious to the public that they are unwilling to change their stance, and the elements that were instruments of the Biafran War remain in the corridors of power. According to the Nigerian newspaper, *Daily Independent*, it has now become anybody’s guess why the most expensive film ever made in Nigeria is yet to show in the country:

Producers have taken the film around the world and have finally decided to show it in Nigeria, but they have not been able. After a lavish premiere in Lagos, the film is yet to hit any

cinema. First, the film was said to be banned, then it was said to be going through a long process of screening. In fact, another release date was made public but the day came and went without any incident. (We don't know)

This newspaper report shows that beyond a subjective analysis of the controversy that trails the censorship of the film, the government is indeed culpable for a political repression of the film. To further attest to the culpability of government, in her discourse, "Ethnic Conflict and the Politics of Greed: Rethinking Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*" Nick Tembo implicates both the British and Nigerian government:

It is a position that is further confirmed by Chimamanda Adichie, who faults the view that it was "'age-old' hatreds" between the North and the South that led to the Nigeria-Biafra civil war. She finds such postulations "misleading" and reiterates the fact that the ethnic tensions and the war they led to were "caused, simply, by the informal divide-and-rule policies of the British colonial exercise." (176)

Nigeria's colonizer cannot be exonerated from the political repression of the Biafra story and the subsequent cinematic suppression of *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Their implication in the civil war and their subsequent misrepresentation of the causes of the war is an act of suppression of the facts of the war. One can also conclude that Nigeria's former colonial masters indirectly or directly have a hand in the initial suppression of certain events in the film. The apparatus and the resources that made the film are mostly British. The misrepresentation and repression of the Nigerian Civil War is a causative agent in other countries in Africa in the 20th century. Tembo asserts that the improper handling of the Biafran War has a multiplying effect in Africa: "This set the stage for the most nefarious inter-ethnic conflicts now being replicated in various social, economic, and political strata in Africa" (176). The political repression of the film *Half of a Yellow Sun* became undeniable

when government officials eventually came out to admit their repression of the movie because of the fear of renewed violence across the country. This was noted by Adichie in *The New Yorker*: “This week Nigerian government censors delayed the release of the film adaptation of *Half of a Yellow Sun* because, according to them, it might incite violence in the country; at issue, is a scene based on a historically documented massacre at a Northern Nigerian airport, Ms. Adichie wrote in *The New Yorker*, an American literary magazine” (Muomah). Elsewhere, in an interview, the head of the Nigerian Video and Films Censors Board without equivocation gives a reason for the repression of the film in a lengthy discussion in Abuja: “The chairman of the board, Patricia Bala, speaking on a radio programme, Productivity Trailblazers on Capital FM 92.9 on Thursday, said that the cinema release of the film was delayed due to security challenges in Nigeria” (Muomah). This interview lays to rest any opposing argument that the film was not politically repressed. The interview came at a time when there was an international outcry as to why a film that cost millions of dollars is not allowed to premiere in Nigerian cinemas. The indictment of the government for lack of sincerity by the press pushed the government to use the Boko Haram crisis as an excuse of concealing their culpability. Before the final release of the film, the Nigerian Video and Films Censors Board became more specific with their cinematic repression: “The board said as opposed to a ban, only some offensive portions of the film which may whip up tribal sentiments will be expunged especially at a time like this when government is currently at war with terrorists” (controversy). And to further indict themselves, the government had to dig into the constitution to support their repression of a film that seeks to represent a social reality. To avoid further embarrassment, the Nigeria Films and Video Censors Board released a press statement:

In a press statement signed by the agency’s acting head, Corporate Affairs, Caesa kagho, the NFVCB restated its position that the movie is not banned as speculated and that the board has

dutifully exercised due diligence consonant with section 36(1) (b) of NFVCB Enabling Law ACT 1993, CAP N40 LFN 2004 which stipulates that “a decision on a film shall ensure that such a film is not likely to undermine national security.” (Ibe)

The suppression in the novel and further repression in the film is captured by Ruth Wenske. She notes how culpability is not boldly allotted in Adichie’s narration. This anonymity of those culpable for the killings of thousands of people can also be observed in the film. Wenske affirms that

Adichie draws horrid brutality of war through individuals. For instance, the Kano massacre is seen through its impact on Olanna—her paralysis, her experience on the train, her memory of her aunt and uncle. But instead of casting the villains in the known collective that commits the atrocities (be it Hausa soldiers or corrupt statesmen) evils lies in the hands of a nameless collective—the mob that commits the atrocities, or even Ugwu and his comrades when they become the anonymous soldiers in a bar. (75)

Wenke’s affirmation shows that the treatment of the Biafra story represents divergent political undertones and interpretations. Its development, its adaptation, and suppression are political. The repressive tendency that pervades all aspects of the Biafra story can be observed.

Ultimately, the film adaptation of *Half of a Yellow Sun* experiences both internal and external suppressions that cannot be explained solely by aesthetics, especially given Leitch's exposure of adaptation theory's fallacies and Hutcheon’s *Theory of Adaptation*. Due to the complexity of adaptation theory and the many misconceptions that pervades the field, I navigate the wrong perceptions in my journey onwards to demystify the political repression of *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Adapting literary works to film is without a doubt a creative undertaking. Analysis of the concept of faithfulness, the centrality of a narrative, narrative functions, and oral

narrative/voice-over have been subjects of cinematic adaptations. An engagement with this theory is imperative to avoid misconceptions and misgivings about contemporary adaptation theory as noted by Thomas Leitch in his essay “Twelve Fallacies in Contemporary Adaptation Theory.”

The cultural heterogeneity of Nigeria laid the foundation for political tensions in the country. The subjugation of certain minority groups became a political solution to avoid the loss of economic and political power. Nigeria rapidly became divided through geographical and political lines that existed in the pre-independence era. The North was more favored because of a more unified administrative system through emirs, a unified religion, and a unified local language. Amongst all the regions, they were the most loyal to the colonizers. They agitated less for Nigeria’s independence. In the face of renewed agitation for Biafra, the significance of this research cannot be over-emphasized. Both Adichie and Bandele are caught in the web of trying to tell what was always untellable. For Bandele, his lack of experience in film production, and his over-reliance on British apparatus reduces his chances to fully tell Adichie’s Biafra story. Their creative works were born into a political atmosphere that was intolerant and not ready to accept culpability in one of Africa’s most gruesome wars. This paper reveals that minorities in the Eastern part of Nigeria have been largely overlooked in the Biafra discourse. In literature and in film, minority men, women and children are absent, which makes many people think that the Biafra struggle is exclusively an Igbo struggle. Minorities in the imagined Biafra territory such as: the Ikwere’s, the Ijaws, the Efiks, the Ibibios, the Ogbias, the Nembes, the Abayon’s, the Abua’s, the Adims, the Agbos, the Akaju-Ndems, Anangs, the Anyimas, the Bahumono’s, the Bokis, Ebanas, the Ekets, the Epies, Etsakos, the Etungs, the Ibenos, the Isokos, the Isekiris, the Iyalas, the Izons, the Mbembe’s, the Okobos, the Orons, Urhobos, the Ogojas, the Okpamheri, Olulumo, the Owan’s, the Ododops, the Nkims, the Mbube’s, the Benin people, and others were suppressed. I have been able to analyze evidence

that shows that the cinematic version of Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* was repressed for political reasons. In an interview, Biyi Bandele Indicts the Nigerian government: "More than 40 years after the end of the end of the war, the problems that caused the war are even more pronounced," Bandele said, "I'm convinced that an organisation like Boko Haram (Islamist extremists) would not exist today if we had dealt with the root cause of the war" ("Controversy Trails"). It would be useful for future research to connect the political dynamics of the Biafra war, the irresponsibility of the government, and their acts of repression with the discussion on Boko Haram. A historical pattern can be revealed. General attitudes of key players in government can reveal the steps that should be taken to avoid another civil war in Nigeria. At this stage in Nigeria's development, there is a need for a re-evaluation of the condition of unity of the diverse ethnic groups that makes up the country. There is also a need for restructuring of Nigeria's federalism so that the country can be free from the plague of colonialism, neocolonialism, and the suppression that pervades the Biafra story and the voices of minorities in the Nigerian society.

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