

The Global North in Achebe's *Arrow of God* and Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*

Chima Anyadike

ABSTRACT

Popular accounts of globalization have tended to dwell on the speed, extent and depth of worldwide interconnectedness in all aspects of contemporary social life, from trade and financial flows to culture, entertainment, crime and spiritual matters. This has given the dominant impression of globalization as inevitable, indeed desirable since it promotes increasing global awareness and interdependency and the emergence of trans-national civil society in which global non-state actors could put pressure on nation-states and international institutions in order to facilitate 'global justice.' What is often left out in these accounts is how the processes of globalization are currently bound to relationships of power, domination and exploitation, thus underplaying the crucial roles of agency, power blocs and imperial interests in a set of concrete social, political and economic agendas promoted and resisted by different agents. What will globalization be like if the racist, imperialist or neo-liberal capitalist driving forces of its processes are acknowledged and seriously addressed? In this paper, we look at how two novelists, Chinua Achebe and Chimamanda Adichie, writing from the same cultural environment but separated by age, gender and style, represent the agents of the powerful globalizing cultures of the north in their novels. Perhaps the problem is not with globalization but the nature of the forces driving its agents.

In his book, *Empire in the Age of Globalisation: US Hegemony and Neoliberal Disorder* (2005), Ray Kiely provides a very cogent discussion of the contemporary period of globalization through his analysis of the different perspectives on the subject. Starting from a clarification of the confusion which he thinks has dogged the globalization debate, a confusion originating from a lack of

distinction between the reality of globalization on one hand, and globalization as a political project on the other hand, he goes on to show the relationship between the project of globalization and the neo-liberal capitalist order. His main concern is that if discussions of globalization do not see it as the product of particular social and political agents involving conflicts that are currently bound to the relationship of power and domination, then the discourse will continue to dwell on the “increase, extensity, velocity and the impact of worldwide connectedness and the consequent intensification of global consciousness” (Kiely, 2005). His whole effort is to put back into the debate, questions of agency, power and domination because in his view, the lack of serious attention to them makes a book like David Held et al.’s *Global Transformations* (1999), “perhaps the most comprehensive account of globalisation to date” (Kiely 18), so incomplete. It is clear from Kiely’s book that both the naïve celebration and the easy demonization of globalization are often masks for interests and strategies that one must learn to detect.

In his “Globalisation, Peace and Cosmopolitics” (in Binde, 2004), Jacques Derrida criticizes those who “try to hide, from others or from themselves, those parts of the world, those populations, nations, groups, classes and individuals who, in massive numbers, are excluded victims of the movement known as ‘the end of work’ or ‘globalisation.’” In his view, “[T]hese victims suffer either because they are without the work they need or because they work too hard for the wages they receive on a world market that is so violently inequalitarian. This capitalist situation (where capital plays an essential role between the real and the virtual) is more tragic in absolute figures than ever before in all of history which has never been farther from the globalizing and globalized homogeneity of ‘work’ and ‘joblessness.’ A large part of humanity is without work but would like work, more work. Another part has too much work and would like to have less, or even to have done with work that is so badly paid in that market” (117). Adebayo Adedeji, the former secretary of Economic Commission for Africa, provides the telling figures in his “The United Nations and Africa in the Next Fifty Years” (1996):

In spite of the talk of the global village, there are two distinct worlds in that village- the industrialized world with 20% of global population but consuming 70% of its metals, 85% of its woods, and 60% of its food and accounting for about 83% of its GDP, 81.2% of world trade, 94% of all commercial lending, about 81% of both domestic saving and investment and 94% of all research and development . . . The region which accounts for 80% of the world’s population and is potentially very rich in natural and human resources contributes only 1% of world’s GDP and accounts also for 1% of its trade.

The Peruvian economist and one time director of Strategic Planning at the

World Bank and chairman of the United Nations Committee of Advisers on Science and Technology for Development, Francisco Sagasti, in his contribution to Binde (2004: 123–6) titled “Science, Technology and Globalisation” summarizes what we have said so far in this way:

Globalisation looks very different when it is seen, not from the capitals of the West, but from the cities and villages of the South. . . . Peru’s macro-economic indicators are excellent. On Wall Street, or in the offices of investment bankers, people will advise you that Peru is a great investment opportunity with low inflation and punctual debt repayments. The situation is not so rosy however, when considered from the perspective of the Peruvians: 50% of the population have been living below the poverty line for the past ten years, 20% of the population are now living below the critical poverty line . . . In Peru, two-thirds of the work force is unemployed or under-employed.

Given this grim picture in which the all pervasive globalization is partly a product of the primacy of market forces, free trade, liberalized finance and open competition on a far from level ground, is there nothing that can be done to develop and empower its more humane potentials? Is there a chance that if the agents of globalization are constantly reminded of its dark side, they may help to transform its processes towards a more democratic, diversified and just world order? With the exception of Japan and China, the engines of globalization have been located in the northern hemisphere. Until recently, when China embarked on an aggressive search for influence and market in Africa, the African economic, socio-cultural and political spaces have remained under the powerful influences of the North. This comes through in almost every important African literary text of the modern period. The focus of the rest of this paper is on how Chinua Achebe and Chimamanda Adichie portray agents of the globalizing north in their respective novels, *Arrow of God* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*.

Chinua Achebe wrote *Arrow of God* in Nigeria and published it in 1964. More than forty years later, with the increasing tempo of globalization, Chimamanda Adichie wrote *Half of a Yellow Sun* between Nigeria and the United States of America and published it in 2006. One way to reflect on the impact and direction of globalization is to explore how these two novelists, separated by age, gender and even themes and style, but writing with identical passion about their common cultural environment, portray in their novels, the representatives of the globalizing cultures of the north. In Achebe’s *Arrow of God*, the colonial situation encourages these representatives to rule their subjects with a good measure of ignorance and a superior attitude on political and cultural matters. They inevitably help to bring about a disintegration which will engender new attempts to forge new cultural identities capable of functioning productively in a globalized late capitalist world. In that emerging, larger world

which has engulfed Umuaro, Ezeulu knew he had to send his son Oduche to the Whiteman's school; Moses Unachukwu sought for a Christianity that respects his traditional belief in the Idemili totem, the python; John Nwodika, having paid heed to his friend Ekemezie's counsel to the effect that everything was good in its season, decided to join the services of the Whiteman, made progress in it and knew when to pull out "to set up a small trade in tobacco" (229). But in that new world, Umuaro and its people lost the power to control the nature and direction of their development.

In the above-mentioned actions, Ezeulu, Moses Unachukwu, and John Nwodika were going against the grain even if they are a step ahead of their people. But these highly individualized responses will only undermine the collective power of Umuaro unless these characters win a lot of people over to their sides. And here is the rub: how to make the local accommodate the global and vice-versa. It is instructive that the only one of the three likely to succeed is John Nwodika who has offered himself to the service of global capital. Cultural matters stand the risk of marginalization, even extinction, if they are not backed by global capital. Given the figures above, the chances of the "cities and villages of the South" getting involved in genuine global cultural exchanges that will give them the sense of being democratic citizens of a globalized world are very slim. This is the fate of Ezeulu whose visionary acts lead to his alienation from his people and lack of integration with the new order. The depth of Ezeulu's anguish is unmistakable:

What troubled him most- and he alone seemed to be aware of it at present- was that the punishment was not for now alone, but for all time. It would afflict Umuaro like an *Ogulu-aro* disease which counts a year and returns to its victim. Beneath all anger in his mind lay a deeper compassion for Umuaro, the clan which long, long ago, when lizards were in ones and twos chose his ancestor to carry their deity and go before them challenging every obstacle and confronting every danger on their behalf.

Ezeulu's loss of his power to the agents of globalization and the near impossibility of he or his successors reclaiming it is the ultimate meaning of the tragedy of *Arrow of God*. Hence the ambiguity implied in the double ending: either "the gods and the powers of event finding Winterbottom handy had used him and left him again in order as they found him" (inexorable but white driven march of history through globalization) or the people will get back themselves in control, Ulu and his chief priest Ezeulu having merely gone out of sync with each other and destroyed themselves. In the latter case, Umuaro people would have fully acknowledged the sheer expediency in their taking of liberties and harvesting their yams in the names of their sons, and recognized the wisdom in Nweke Ukpaka's words; "The white man is like hot soup and we

must take him slowly-slowly from the edges of the bowl” (85) What they do with the power obtained from digesting the soup, they will have to decide.

Such a time of decision indeed appears to have arrived in Chimamanda’s novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006). To appreciate the extent of the apparent difference between the white men of *Arrow of God* and those of this novel, we must remember that the book *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger* by George Allen, the district commissioner who ended the story of *Things Fall Apart* (1958), has become an authoritative handbook in *Arrow of God*, where it is clearly stated as the guiding belief of the colonial officers that the British are the models for all peoples and that it is their duty “to lead the backward races into line” (33). It is, therefore, not surprising that Nigeria, for Winterbottom, is a “land of waking nightmares” (30) and one thing one “must remember in dealing with natives is that like children, they are great liars.” (38) As Oyin Ogunba observed, for Winterbottom:

... the Igbo people are *savage* and the country itself turns into a *furnace* about mid-morning; the first rain in the year is a *riot* and the cool wind which usually follows the heat is *treacherous*. The festivals are *unspeakable rites* and the war between Okperi and Umuaro is a *big savage war*. Palm wine is a *dreadful stuff* which natives consume in large quantities. (9)

Winterbottom of course advises his colleagues not to “lower themselves in the eyes of the natives” (32) by sleeping with native women.

In contrast, Richard of *Half of a Yellow Sun* not only abandons the possessive love of a fellow white woman, but undergoes the full processes of wooing and genuinely feeling the anxieties and jealousies of falling in love before he happily gets engaged to a cynical Nigerian girl, Kainene. What is more, despite his full hearted involvement in the Nigerian civil war, he matures to the realization that he is not competent to write the story of Biafra from whose perspective he witnessed the war. Yet he took time to make special efforts towards integrating himself into the Igbo culture by, for example, learning to speak the Igbo language and developing a genuine admiration for the Igbo-Ukwu art. So he stands in a stark contrast not only to Winterbottom and his colleagues at Government Hill but also to George Allen, all of who never fail to point to how they know the natives very well. But perhaps that is where the contrast ends. There is hardly any difference between Achebe’s portrayal of Winterbottom and his group and Adichie’s description of the first group of white people we encounter in her novel:

They were mostly English, ex-colonial administrators and business people from John Holt and Kingsway and United African Company. . . .

They discussed cricket, plantations they owned or planned to own . . . When Richard mentioned his interest in Igbo-Ukwu art, they said it

didn't have much of a market yet, so he did not bother to explain he wasn't at all interested in the money, it was the aesthetics that drew him. And when he said he had just arrived in Lagos and wanted to write a book about Nigeria, they gave him brief smiles and advice: The people were bloody beggars; be prepared for their body odours and the way they will stand and stare at you on the roads; never believe a hard-luck story, never show weakness to domestic staff. (53–4)

What changed from Winterbottom's time is the blunt admission by Adichie's white men that they were in Nigeria purely for business on behalf of global capital. As for the "dusky affair" Richard had with Kainene, Susan promptly admonishes him: "will you make sure always to use a rubber? One must be careful, even with the most educated of these people" (236).

Through Achebe's ambivalent ending of his novel and Adichie's characterization of Richard, the authors indicate an optimism beyond the cautionary despair which informs their representation of the white man's presence in Nigeria during the colonial and the postcolonial periods. But one way to further the aim of this paper is to explore whether we can derive from these novels enough support for the view that this optimism is not misplaced, given the positive side of globalization in form of increasing speed and extent of communications across the globe which, when added to the volume of travel, trade and migration, ought to bring about an advancement in relations between peoples that will make real the difference between the colonial and the post-colonial worlds. In other words, what insights from these novels support the view of globalization as processes of exchange rather than impositions, domination and exploitation? It is difficult not to see globalization in practice as really only a modern, subtle form of colonization. And just as 'enlightenment' and 'progress' were used to cover up the political and economic motives of colonialism, 'technological advancement,' 'fight against ignorance,' 'hunger,' 'poverty' and 'diseases' are now mere slogans that cover up same motives in the discourse of globalization's interconnectedness, high velocity and 'global flows'. As Kiely suggests, hard core economics and political questions must be seen as the engines directing these flows and must be addressed in discussions if globalization is to move away from modern empire building into a genuinely progressive enrichment of human life across the globe.

In Achebe's earlier novel, *Things Fall Apart*, he narrates the story of Rev. Brown who understands, after several discussions with the elders and people of Umuofia, that the people will not abandon their local gods for the so called true universal God merely on theological grounds. He quickly learns that increased trade, schools, health clinics and a change of methods and attitudes are sure ways to win over some of the people and bring for him a good measure of respect, admiration and even friendship. The people recognize that the

needs they expect their relationships with their gods to satisfy were just being expressed and satisfied in new ways in a new and expanded situation. But it is a new situation which has to include, not exclude, the core values of the Umuofia worldview. This early fictional attempt at genuine globalization is abrogated when Rev. Smith takes over from Rev. Brown and sees only black and white with no grey area in between.

Winterbottom of *Arrow of God* is only an incarnation of Rev. Smith in the political sphere. The only man he tolerates in Umuaro, and who in his view, is the only truth sayer, Ezeulu “must have had some pretty fierce tabu working on him”. And there is obviously a connection between this tolerance and the fact that Ezeulu “was very light in complexion, almost red” and Winterbottom had the “theory that the Ibos (sic) in the distant past assimilated a small *non-negroid* tribe of the same complexion as the Red Indians” (38). We have seen how everything else, from the weather to the customs of the Igbo, conjure up in his mind, savage and terrifying images. It is important to note, however, that important paragraph in the memorandum from the colonial Lieutenant-Governor which comes close in some respects, at least in principle, to some of the ideals of a healthy globalization:

To many colonial nations, native administration means government by white men. You are all aware that H.M.G considers this policy as mistaken. In place of the alternative of governing directly through Administrative officers, there is the other method of trying, while we endeavour to purge the native system of its abuses, to build a higher civilization upon the soundly rooted native stock that had its foundation in the hearts and minds, and thoughts of the people and therefore on which we can more easily build, moulding it and establishing it into lines consonant with modern ideas and higher standards and yet all the time enlisting the real force of the spirit of the people instead of killing all that out and trying to start afresh. We must not destroy the African atmosphere, the African mind, the whole foundation of his race . . . (55–6).

The above passage sounds like a good globalization policy, but requires for its successful execution agents humble enough to grant to other cultures especially those of other races, certain dignity that will predispose them towards sincere attempts at genuine cross-cultural understanding. Leaving aside the question of what yardstick to use in deciding what constitutes ‘abuses’ and ‘higher civilization,’ and who is to decide how to identify the ‘soundly rooted native stock,’ it is only to be expected that the owners of the cultures must be involved in any dialogue aimed at reaching acceptable decisions. It is often said that while all cultures are equal in dignity, not all values are equivalent. It is also fairly obvious that all cultures are aware of this and so continually subject values and questionable cultural practices to re-evaluation. Ezeulu mentions

in his conversations with his friend Akuebue how Umuaro had abandoned certain practices in the past. The point is that values evolve and must be negotiated and shaped in common by actors that are often very different. Values which have been examined in common will then be respected, but not imposed. The globalization worth working for is the one that promotes the pluralism of values that have been subjected to cross-cultural dialogue by actors who respect the peculiarities of local situations. Centuries of slavery on a massive commercial scale, colonialism and international capitalism which have obliterated or ignored some treasured humane values have not provided Africans the opportunity to develop any sense of truly belonging and shaping the world. In a truly globalized world, they expect new unexpected hybridizations, new networks of affinity or alliances and new cross-cultural individual/com-munal spiritual quests. The resulting dialogues should continually redefine the meaning of development and progress.

It is clear from the above that Capt. Winterbottom, ironically “the man on the spot who knew his African and knew what he was talking about” (56) and whose mind is affected by denied promotion, is not a great candidate for any dialogue with Umuaro. Indeed, the tragedy of *Arrow of God* rests squarely on Winterbottom and his colleagues’ inability to understand Ezeulu’s significance for Umuaro. The choice for a warrant chief need not have been between an upstart like Chief James Ikedi, whose cruelty was “of a kind which Africa alone produced” and “the impressive-looking fetish priest . . . Who spoke the truth” (59). In the same way, Oduche cannot effectively be both a Christian and his father’s ‘eye.’ Moses Unachukwu cannot convincingly combine a belief in “the true God” of the Christians and Idemili’s python and so does not command great respect from either side.

Yet it is important that Mr. Wright’s new road is being constructed to link Umuaro to the rest of the world to ensure that John Nwodika and his fellow traders prosper in the new forms of trade and that there are other genuine exchanges between cultures. However, Nweke Ukpaka and Nwoye Udora, members of the Otakagu age group whose labor was commandeered for work on the road raise the political and ethical questions which bring us back to the present practice of globalization:

It is not enough to ask him why we are not paid. He knows why and we know why. He knows that in Okperi those who do this kind of work are paid. Therefore the question you should ask him is this: others are paid for this work; why are we not paid? Or is our own different? (86)

Winterbottom had earlier informed Mr. Clarke that “Okperi welcomed missionaries and government while Umuaro, on the other hand, has remained backward” (37). In the end, therefore, it is not surprising that what survives and thrives in Umuaro is Christianity and comprador capitalism. Christianity

removes the teeth from the bite of men like Moses Unachukwu and he convinces his people to resign themselves to the inevitability of white rule. Will the little respect left in him be enough for him to someday seek for the rehabilitation of Idemili? Will Umuaro have many John Nwodikas to form the nucleus of a middle class with a progressive cultural nationalism? Only maybe. That eventuality will largely depend on the support of white men like Richard of Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*.

In his relationship with Kainene, Richard is at first symbolically and literally unable to 'perform' (63). He takes his study of the Igbo language very seriously (67), develops genuine admiration for Igbo-Ukwu art, enjoys Igbo food, and in general refuses to essentialise the other on the basis of race. His whole attitude leads Miss Adebayo to proclaim that "Richard was an African in his past life" (108). In this novel, Igboland has been opened up not only to international trade and business which allows the likes of Chief and Mrs. Ozobia and children to travel to and from London the way people of Umuaro can only walk to and from Okperi, but also to the influences from institutions like universities and international organizations. The successes in trade and education have been derived from the ease in travel and speed of communications such that there is considerable migration to other countries and a powerful diasporic consciousness. In a world with so much mingling between peoples, it is not surprising that Richard had come to Nigeria ready to learn from the situation he encounters, believing that men and women have the same strengths and weaknesses all over the world. And yet Adichie portrays Richard as more of an exception among his fellow whites. So that if we ask, will Igboland and Africa have many Richards who will help reshape the nature and direction of globalization, our answer will again be, maybe. And our hope will be anchored in someone like Count von Rosen who agrees with Richard that Kainene and the Igbo-Ukwu art are "beautiful, both" (310) and sees Biafra as a "remarkable country," the cause of which he risks so much to serve as he did elsewhere like Ethiopia and Warsaw.

The Biafran war was not just a fight between two aggrieved brothers to be settled in the ways they are used to: international oil politics was a central issue. Not many people will pretend that the British and American involvement in the Gulf war is not directly connected with oil politics. Just as Winterbottom broke the guns to settle the war between Umuaro and Okperi in favor of the friendly Okperi, Britain and Russia supplied the guns to settle the war between Nigeria and Biafra in favor of the 'friendly' Nigeria. The driving force of the friendship in both cases is economic and political gain. Karl Polanyi's reference to how "instead of economy being embedded in social relations, social relations are embedded in the economic system" (1994:57) aptly describes both the colonial and globalization's international relations. When a society loses control over its economy, it can only look forward to an intensifi-

cation of inequalities as we have in the actually existing global order. Umuaro and Biafra lost that control and the people are exploring the possibilities inherent in their new trans-national identities. It is instructive in this regard that both Achebe and Adichie live and work between Nigeria and the United States of America. But this does not mean that the problem of gross inequalities is not intensifying in their Nigerian society. Ray Kiely reports on how placards at May Day anti-globalization protests in Sydney and Melbourne in 2001 read “We live in a society, not an Economy” (qtd. in 2005:179). The two authors would probably agree that it is ultimately more fulfilling to belong to and work to advance the cause of a society rather than that of some nebulous global economy.

From discussing Achebe’s *Arrow of God* and Adichie’s *Half a Yellow Sun*, it is clear that the progress of globalization can be better served if societies are not deprived of the political and economic power to control their self development. Human, material and scientific resources may come from inside and outside, but control must effectively be from within. This does not ensure justice and equality, but it is a better alternative for the evolution of the internal mechanisms designed for these purposes. Consequently, when a Richard or even a Wright comes to Nigeria, he will find that working with Nweke Ukpaka and Nwoye Udora to make the road that will ease John Nwodika’s trade is likely to help create a society that will make a better sense of globalization. It is in that spirit that Nweke Ukpaka deploys the wise saying of his people:

The stranger will not kill his host with his visit;
When he goes; may he not go with a swollen back. (85)

And since Richard finally comes to the conclusion that he cannot write the true Biafran story, no matter how involved he becomes in its struggles, we can expect that when Ugwu finally publishes his book *The World Was Silent When We Died*, it will be the long awaited replacement for George Allen’s *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger* in Africa’s meta-fictional world, thereby enshrining the examples of Rev. Brown and Richard as acceptable agents of the globalizing North.

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