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Beyond Censorship: Contestation in *Half of a Yellow Sun*'s Cinematic Adaptation

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Abstract

In the last few decades, particularly since 1999, Nigeria has been faced with enormous challenges. None, however, seems to trigger a deeper sense of apprehension than the thought or mention of Biafra. Though the country 'ceased to exist' in 1970, after a perfunctory reconciliation programme, Biafra, expressed either in figurative or rhetorical terms or principally as part of a future experiment or movement as seen recently in parts of Eastern Nigeria, evokes not only a feeling of mutual suspicion but a stark denial of a lived experience. The film, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, an adaptation of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel with the same title, readily confirms this belief. Billed to screen in Nigerian cinemas on April 25, 2014, the film suddenly witnessed series of roadblocks by Nigeria's Censors Board. Although the film eventually premiered in August of the same year, the Board's initial refusal to certify the film, raised suspicions among citizens on Nigeria's bland attitude towards any material expressions on the Nigeria-Biafra civil war. This study explores the trajectory of events that led to the censorship and eventual certification of the movie. It identifies and clarifies some historical inaccuracies depicted in the movie in the account of the civil war. The study argues that a film of this nature, irrespective of its framings, could serve as a veritable tool for a collective and useful discussion on the civil war, rather than the familiar contestations it evokes across divides.

Key Words: Censorship, NFVCB, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Biafra, Civil War, Nigeria

Introduction

The early postcolonial phase of Nigeria was bedevilled with enormous challenges, chief of which was ethnic and sectional divisions. By 1966, six years into independence, the country slid into a crisis that ushered in two bloody coups and the breakaway of the Eastern Region, sparking the Nigeria-Biafra war. In the prelude to the war, many Easterners who were domiciled particularly in the Northern region became targets of widespread massacre. As fallout of the Federal Government's failure to respond appropriately to the massacre, the Eastern Region acted swiftly by declaring self-independence to secure its own survival and security. The government's desire to re-assert its authority started the war in 1967.¹ Although the war ended with Biafran surrender in 1970 and an olive branch extended to all Easterners through the government's 3R (Reconciliation, Rehabilitation and Reconstruction) program, none of these were fully implemented to the Easterners.² Since 1970, the Nigerian Government's attitude to the Biafra conflict has generally remained retributive, suppressive, and repressive. The fallout of this conflict has resulted in the political, economic, and social exclusion of the Eastern Region in the last four and half decades and triggered the emergence of supra-ethnic agencies as a response to decades of government 'intransigence' to the civil war.³

Like the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) among other supra-ethnic movements, who today exudes the memories of Biafra and the Nigeria-Biafra war, the movie, *Half of a Yellow Sun* illustrates one of the few attempts at re-enacting the past in ways that could help generate useful discussions about Nigeria's present challenges and perhaps, pathways to national reconciliation. Despite not being wholly set on the civil war, at least within the context of its portrayal as the 'love story' of two sisters wedged in the wave of the Biafra war, fears subsist among the political class that such a film could trigger a nationwide conflagration. However true this may seem, the mishandling of the film has revealed the fact that the country continues to live perpetually in denial about the 1967 Biafra experience. The case has questioned the sincerity of the political class in tackling many of its inherited challenges since independence. Thus, the causes of series of roadblocks faced by the film at the outset are understandable.

The film, as the study shall later illuminate, faced enormous challenges right from conception. By the time it was ready for the cinemas, the Nigerian Film and Video Censors Board denied the movie certification. This block delayed its initial date of release for four months.⁴ Under

¹ For a historical background on the Nigeria-Biafra war, see Charles R. Nixon, "Self-Determination: The Nigeria/Biafra Case", *World Politics*, 24/4 (1972): 473-497.

² Norman Thomas Uphoff and Harold Ottemoeller, "After the Nigerian Civil War: With Malice toward Whom?" *Africa Today* 17/2 (1970): 1-4; George Onyejiuwa, "South East Marginalisation Started with Gowon's Regime", *Sun Newspaper*, November 13, 2018.

³ Chimaobi Nwaiwu, "Pandemonium as Police, MASSOB Clash during 16th Anniversary Service", *Vanguard*, September 14, 2015.

⁴ The author reliably gathered from the former Executive Director of the NFVCB that the agency did not grant approval for the Lagos premiere of HOAYS on April 12, 2014, suggesting that the movie was premiered illegally.

the circumstances, we are hard-pressed to express whether this was fortuitous or calculated. However, *Half of a Yellow Sun* illustrates some of the immense challenges the stakeholders in the Nigerian film industry face in terms of raising awareness against the background of Nigeria's 'ignoble' past. A film such as this, with hues of the country's brutal past, often set off momentous contestations, and in most cases fear of violent attacks. Was the Censors Board, therefore, imperceptive or judicious in its reaction to the movie? Was its strict censorship, as feared in some quarters, part of the typical political culture of denial? While critical responses shall be provided subsequently, this study examines some of the events that led to the deferments by the Censors Board and eventual premiering of the film. It also highlights and clarifies some of the accounts of the civil war depicted in the movie. The study argues that a film of this nature, regardless of its critics, could serve as a veritable tool for a collective and useful discussion on the civil war, rather than the familiar contestations it evokes in certain divides. It is, therefore, a potentially important addition to the scholarship on both the Nigerian cinema and the treatment of conflict and post-war trauma.

Half of a Yellow Sun: A Didactic Review

The discussion here is not meant to follow the conventional routine of reviewing or in this case, critiquing a movie. The intention, therefore, is to examine what may be referred to as the 'historic pointers' spotted in the movie and set one or two records straight, which illustrate part of the arguments in this particular study. While it may appear, as earlier mentioned, that the film is inherently a "tribute to love...that holds people together" as Chimamanda Adichie aptly describes it,⁵ we are, nonetheless, particularly entranced by some of the scenes in the movie knitted around three historically defining events: the First Republic (1960-1966), the January (1966) coup and, of course, the civil war a year after (1967-1970). This nonetheless, is fitting to state here that the exercise below is linked in many ways to the fate of the film in the hands of Nigeria's film regulator, hence the review below.

Comparatively, the film and novel are distances apart particularly in terms of character roles. For instance, in the novel, Odenigbo's houseboy, Ugwu was the main narrator but was made inconspicuous in the movie, while Kainene and Olanna took centre stage. Also, the two main political actors mentioned in the novel were subjected to nearly invisible characters in the movie. Although this may have been deliberate, it is possible that the director may have been coerced by the regulatory agency into making a film with 'unseen' characters as against their perceptible manifestations in the novel, which shall be discussed subsequently. Interestingly, the reception by Nigerians to both the novel and film appear ambivalent. However, for a country whose youth population did not witness the civil war but is firmly drawn to the movie industry (Nollywood), the

⁵ Adichie stated in an interview that in her novel her intention was "to write about love and war" while the film's director, Biyi Bandele suggests that the movie is "a love letter to Nigeria's very complex and complicated history." Incidentally, posters made for the Nigerian premiere was captioned: "Divided by war, united by love."

Nigerian attitude to the film would have been seen strictly in terms of its artistic verve, captivating storyline, and visual creativity.

We begin with what I term *the coup jaw-jaw*, where we are introduced to the scene of the announcement of a coup over the radio and discussions around it by Professor Odenigbo, Ms. Adebayo, Olanna, Okeoma, and two others.⁶ As it appeared, these discussions, political in colour – were regularly hosted on weekends at the instance of Odenigbo with a coterie of multi-ethnic intellectuals from the University of Nsukka. Viewers, here, see the loud-talking, hyperactive Odenigbo, as Adichie labelled him, in his archetypal revolutionary verve, visibly excited about the coup announcement and then respond immediately by assuming the coup was simply the end of corruption. His colleague Okeoma soon reacted with the indication that the coup plotters were “true heroes” but Ms. Adebayo seemed indifferent. Though quoting the BBC, which suggested that the event was an ‘Igbo coup,’ she calmly agreed since, according to her, “it was mostly Northerners who were killed.” Another colleague, who albeit did not openly validate the former’s position, believed this could have been true given that “it was mostly Northerners in government,” suggesting further that no one else would have felt the brunt except Northerners. Odenigbo, on the other hand, countered the Igbo coup tag and wondered why the BBC, in obvious reference to its owners – the British government – did not ask “who put the Northerners in government to dominate everybody.” He went further to eulogise Major Nzeogwu, arguing that Nigeria would have been a better place under his leadership. In the midst of the discussion, a white American colleague asked if Nzeogwu was a communist.

The plot here is an excellent reminder of the shades of opinion expressed across the country in the aftermath of the January 1966 coup. Odenigbo’s excitement on hearing the coup over the radio would appear as though he was supportive of his kinsmen for plotting the so-called Igbo coup. This may not have been true.⁷ The fact that there is only little evidence that the coup plotters had a grand ‘Igbo agenda’; extensive interviews of some of the coup participants and eyewitness accounts⁸ suggest that the coup was indeed, pan-Nigerian.⁹ In fact, the event has been greeted with excitement and unwavering approval among Nigerians¹⁰ and thus, illustrates Decalo’s contention

⁶ The author has deliberately used the names of the cast throughout the study to avoid any mix-up.

⁷ There are suggestions that some Igbo politicians had prior knowledge of the coup and thus, took precautions to save their lives. Nnamdi Azikiwe is often pointed as a typical example. Though evidence suggest that Azikiwe was targeted for murder by the Majors, he had, nevertheless, taken a lengthy medical leave abroad on doctor’s advice with prior knowledge and approval from the Prime Minister, Tafawa Balewa. See Max Siollun, *Oil, Politics and Violence: Nigeria’s Military Coup Culture (1966–1976)* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2009), 68 and 80.

⁸ “January 15, 1966 Coup: Why they called it an Igbo Coup – Mbazulike Amechi,” *Vanguard*, January 15, 2016.

⁹ Siollun, *Oil, Politics and Violence*, 141; *New Nigerian*, January 18, 1966; *Newswatch*, January 8, 1990; *Guardian*, May 06, 2007.

¹⁰ Chinua Achebe, *There was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra* (New York: Penguin Books, 2012), Siollun, *Oil, Politics and Violence*, 57.

that the coup was a symptom of “developmental strains and stress” in the Nigerian political system.¹¹ By the end of 1965, the country was on the brink of a political crisis and some called for a military solution for some sanity to reign. Still, the idea that corruption had finally come to an end following the coup was not totally out of place. This is because politics of the First Republic, if we go by a commentator’s view, was inherently centred on “material gain; making money and living.”¹² It was clear to the coup plotters and keen observers of the period that the political class had not only corrupted the country ‘by their words and deeds’ and for some, needed to be gunned down,¹³ but also it divided the country into ethnic lines for self-serving purposes. As nepotism and tribalism heightened, it became clear why the country remained tense. While it is not for us to suggest whether or not the coup plotters were ‘heroes’, although echoes across the country implied so,¹⁴ the belief that Northerners were the major casualties of the coup¹⁵ and that they had ‘dominated’ the government appears somewhat valid.¹⁶

Following up with the interpretations of the paragraph above, the depiction of Okonji in the film as a terrified man who “shit in his trousers before they shot him” may have been exaggerated; yet, his portrayal as a corrupt government official may not have appeared so in reality, particularly in light of recent revelations.¹⁷ Also, the question of whether Nzeogwu was a communist to have inspired such a bloody coup was reminiscent of the fears among Western powers, especially Britain¹⁸ who did much to sabotage any communist efforts or sympathies in the country.¹⁹ Of course, the ideological gulf between the Eastern and Western blocs continued into

¹¹ Samuel Decalo, “Military Coups and Military Regimes in Africa”, *JMAS* 11, no. 1 (1973): 108.

¹² Michael M. Ogbeidi, “Political Leadership and Corruption in Nigeria Since 1960: A Socio-economic Analysis”, *Journal of Nigeria Studies* 1/2 (Fall 2012): 6.

¹³ *Daily Telegraph*, January 22, 1966.

¹⁴ Akachi Odoemene, “Ethnic Balkanization in Nigeria-Biafra War Narratives,” in *Writing the Nigeria-Biafra War*, eds. Toyin Falola and Ogechukwu Ezekwem (New York: Boydell & Brewer Inc., 2016), 184.

¹⁵ Toyin Falola and Matthew M. Heaton, *A History of Nigeria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 173.

¹⁶ Siollun's rich appendix provides us with details about the arguments of northern domination between January 14 and 15, 1967. See Siollun, *Oil, Politics and Violence*, 219-226.

¹⁷ See Akinjide Osuntokun, *Festus Samuel Okotie-Eboh: in Time and Space*, ed. (Ibadan: B Editions, 2016). For a contrary view, see Harold Smith, *A Squalid End to Empire: British Retreat from Africa* (Libertas, 1987).

¹⁸ Otigbu F. Ogwugwua, “Osita Agwuna: A Study in Biography” (B.A. Long Essay, Lagos State University, 1992), 16. Also see American Consulate General Despatch No 118. March 08, 1950; British National Archives (BNA): KV2/1818/422256 “Benjamin Nnamdi Azikiwe, alias Zik, Nigerian: independence leader suspected of having communist sympathies at various points in his political carrier” and G. O. Olusanya, “The Zikist Movement – A Study in Political Radicalism”, *JMAS* 4/3 (1966), pp.323-333.

¹⁹ Segun O. Osoba, “The Transition to Neo-Colonialism,” in *Britain and Nigeria: Exploitation or Development?* ed. Toyin Falola (London: Zed Books Ltd., 1987), 239; Edwin O. Madunagu, *The Tragedy of the Nigerian Socialist Movement* (Calabar: Centaur Press, 1980).

the 1950s and 1960s, and it was expected that both blocs would, with their last drop of blood, protect their sphere of influence against communist or capitalist infiltrations as the case may be. It is, therefore, understood why the American in the movie raised the question, even though Odenigbo erroneously believed that Nigerians did not have the time to worry about such concern.²⁰

On our next pointer is what I have tagged *ethnopolitical chauvinism*, where Olanna at the Kano Airport was accosted by possibly an air-bound passenger, who quickly offered her a newspaper to read the bulging headline on the back cover about the removal of the Igbo Vice-Chancellor (VC) of the University of Lagos. It was obvious that this passenger was of Yoruba origin and typically echoing similar sentiments among people in the Southwestern part of the country on the tense situation at the University. The removal of the Igbo VC by the government in 1965 had pitched the university Senate against Council over the appointment of a new VC who incidentally was Yoruba.²¹ While we may not be able to explain the extent and depth of the abysmal situation,²² our contention here is that such removal in some quarters was perceived to have been exercised in bad faith. Also, it is argued that the replacement reeked of ethnic favouritism. It is against this backdrop that the air-bound passenger, perhaps an academic himself like Olanna, must have made such uncomplimentary remark with such revulsion that the Igbo had a unique problem of ‘dominance’ and often chose to “control everything in th[e] country.” Not finished yet, he accused the Igbo of owning “all the shops” and controlling “the civil service, [and] even the police.” For him, the mention of *keda* (how are you) was simple enough to set a criminal of Igbo descent free. All the same, our air-bound passenger was deeply embarrassed to know Olanna was Igbo, having corrected him on his mispronunciation of the word *keda*. As it seemed, the former had thought all along he was speaking with a Fulani, whom he assumed appeared like one.

The crisis at the University of Lagos assumed a new meaning as rumours spread that the ‘deposed’ VC, ‘typical of the average Igbo’, wanted to perpetuate himself even after he had been asked to leave, an action aimed at fanning the embers of discord at the university. While this may not be the true picture of things, it was, nevertheless, clear that the crisis had shades of ethnicity and favouritism. The new VC was alleged to have been sympathetic to the government of the day. Indeed, at a time of extreme tribal loyalties in the Southwestern region, on the one hand, and across

²⁰ There were several instances where federal ministers dating back to 1961 expressed fear and worry about crushing consequences from the West for attempting to enact policies that were deemed pro-communist. See Segun Osoba, “The Deepening Crisis of the Nigerian National Bourgeoisie”, *Review of African Political Economy*, 5/13 (1978): 64.

²¹ Larry J. Diamond, *Class, Ethnicity and Democracy in Nigeria: The Failure of the First Republic* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1988), 249.

²² For more light on this controversy, see Roland Ogbonnaya, “Forty Years of Unilag,” *Thisday*, November 13, 2002, accessed on May 15, 2019, <https://allafrica.com/stories/200211130556.html>. Diamond, *Class, Ethnicity and Democracy in Nigeria*, 249.

the federation, on the other hand, it was not unexpected that all government-appointed seven Yoruba members of the Provisional Council would endorse the removal of the former VC, while replacing him with a politically and ethnically sympathetic figure. Incidentally, as the university is centred in Yorubaland, it would naturally be perceived among interest groups as a Yoruba university although the institution was federal-owned and should necessarily not be run based on ethnic considerations.²³

The film takes us to the scene where Odenigbo, in his characteristic revolutionary outburst, vents his anger at Ms. Adebayo, accusing her Yoruba kinsmen of conspiracy against the Igbo and giving tactical silence to the pogrom in the north. I have coined this particular scene *collegiate wrangling*. Odenigbo had wondered in anger why their university colleagues in Ibadan and Zaria remained silent when foreign officials “encouraged the killing” of Igbo. The latter accusation was made in connection with the Kano Airport killing of Igbos by supposed Northern military officers as depicted in the film. Whether or not foreigners emboldened the killings in Kano remains debatable. While the killing at the airport was a fact, the depiction of silence among academics specifically in Ibadan and other universities in the Southwest was absolutely inaccurate.²⁴ An instance suffices here: in the event leading to secession, Yakubu Gowon, who had vowed to “crush the rebellion” met stiff disapproval among Yoruba intellectuals for such hostile language. While the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University, Ife), Professor Hezekiah Oluwasanmi, described such words as unfortunate, Justice Kayode Eso of the Western Court of Appeal claimed the statement was not the path to making Nigeria one.²⁵ Similarly, Wole Soyinka was held in prison for his alleged sympathy for Biafra, while Fela Anikulapo in the song, ‘Viva Nigeria’ argued for a united Nigeria.²⁶

Not done yet, Odenigbo faces Ms. Adebayo directly with an indicting statement, saying had she not been in Igboland, she too would have kept silent at the killings. Perhaps, this scene creates the impression that an earlier conversation had been ongoing between the two academics if we are to critically weigh the latter’s firm response. Having been accused of expressing little or no sympathy (for the Igbo), Ms. Adebayo, who strongly believed that “secession is not the only way to security” also claimed her firm position, did not reduce her sympathy for those brutally murdered in the North. Odenigbo, who suddenly became overtly abrasive and appeared not to have

²³ Levi A. Nwachuku and G.N. Uzoigwe, *Troubled Journey: Nigeria since the Civil War*, eds. (Maryland: University Press of America, 2004), 27.

²⁴ Quite surprisingly, the University of Ibadan in collaboration with the Christopher Okigbo Foundation recently celebrated 50 years of Okigbo’s death at the Trenchard Hall of the university where Okigbo once taught. See Omiko Awa, “Celebrating Legacies of Okigbo 50 Years After,” *Guardian*, October 01, 2017.

²⁵ Damola Awoyokun, “Biafra: The Untold Story of Nigeria’s Civil War – Part 1”, Biafra memorial, 27 September 2013, accessed October 15, 2017, <http://www.biaframemorial.org/biafra-the-untold-story-of-nigerias-civil-war-part-1/>

²⁶ Paul Nugent, *Africa since Independence: A Comparative History* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 99.

had enough, accused Yoruba chiefs of visiting the emirs in the North to thank them “for sparing the Yoruba people.” This claim, as it were, flies in the face of evidence given by one Mr. Strong, US consul in Ibadan at the time, who had close interactions with some of the Yoruba intelligentsia. He claimed that the Yoruba ‘intellectuals’ and ‘modernizers’ found the civil war not only objectionable and suspiciously conceived as part of the North’s agenda to dominate the South, but also expressed fear that, should the East be subdued by the North, the West would follow suit.²⁷ What this illustrates is that rather than go to war, a peaceful resolution should be pursued, and that in the event of any knowledge of Eastern domination, the Yoruba would similarly take to secession. Also, Yoruba chiefs had no reason to travel North to thank its emirs for not killing the Yoruba. This is because the central government was adequately represented by Chief Obafemi Awolowo, a Yoruba, who was equally as powerful throughout and after the war period, and whose leadership position would necessarily have allayed fears in the Southwest of any Northern domination of the region.

Furthermore, Odenigbo’s accusation that the Yoruba people in Lagos killed Igbos may not be true, at least, based on the spatial outlook of the city.²⁸ While we do not dispute the fact that Igbos were killed in Lagos, we are, nonetheless, of the view that these attacks were mild – unlike in the North, which was calculated and widespread – and could not be pinned on one particular ethnic group.²⁹ For instance, Christopher Okigbo on his return to Ibadan from Lagos in August 1966 was nearly killed on his way to Ikeja Airport by soldiers led by one Corporal Paul Dickson.³⁰ Whether Dickson was Yoruba is not readily known, but the claim by Edith Ike-Okongu, Yakubu Gowon’s Igbo partner, of allegedly being threatened in Lagos twice since her swift return in March from the North (by unknown persons) proves Odenigbo’s position weak as to his indictment of the Yoruba³¹ but tenable within the context of the killings in Lagos.³²

Though other *historic pointers* in the film can be covered for critical study,³³ we cannot sufficiently capture them in one article. Yet, what we have been done here is to put to stringent

²⁷ Awoyokun, “Biafra: The Untold Story”.

²⁸ Lagos was the seat of power at the time and it was a cosmopolitan city with diverse group of peoples engaged in commercial enterprises.

²⁹ The author is grateful to Prof. Siyan Oyeweso of the Department of History & International Studies, Osun State University, Osogbo, for this vital information.

³⁰ Obi Nwakanma, *Christopher Okigbo, 1930-67: Thirsting for Sunlight* (Suffolk: James Currey, 2010), 223.

³¹ Two cases are apt for citation here: While Ojukwu's sister was provided sanctuary in one Dr. Oshodi's house, a Yoruba, Achebe, who was suspected and haunted by the military for having foreknowledge of the "Igbo coup", following the publication of the book, *A Man of the People*, took cover with his family in a hideout for several weeks in Lagos before finding his way to the East. See Siollun, *Oil, Politics and Violence*, 137 and 135.

³² It is probable that few killings in Lagos were carried out by military officers largely of northern origin.

³³ The Kano Airport killing is a typical case here. For details on this, see “Massacre in Kano,” *Time Magazine*, October 14, 1966. See also, Siollun, *Oil, Politics and Violence*, 135.

textual analysis some of the manifestations of Nigeria's somewhat 'tempestuous' past as conveyed in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, although a fraction of the narratives built around the film appear ambivalent. This may have been a deliberate attempt by the director to downplay the more realistic imaginations of the Biafra war firmly depicted in the original work by Adichie. Interestingly, Adichie's view that "major political events in the book are 'factually' correct", appear to be totally true, yet few of these events depicted in the film proved historically fictive.³⁴ It is also possible that this may have been influenced by the Censors Board's request to the producers to remove some scenes from the movie before it is given certification. The *historic pointers* examined above has, therefore, sufficiently clarified a few of the inaccuracies in the account of the civil war presented in the film. In any case, not minding if the film is considered "stately and sluggish,"³⁵ the film represents one of the boldest contemporary attempts since the civil war, at evoking memories of that brutal past in Nigeria's history. Beyond this, it serves as a reminder of the noxious legacy bequeathed by British colonial rule which heightened deep-seated divisions among Africans, causing rapid destruction of democratic institutions at independence and brutal wars that are still sources of contention today.³⁶

An Art Troubled from the Start

In a blistering article, renowned author Ayo Sogunro paints a lucid picture of how the political configuration of the Nigerian state was specifically structured to 'kill all of us'.³⁷ The impression given here is that there is often a deliberate attempt by known or invisible forces to put a roadblock to any fruitful venture in the country. The Nigerian state, he argues further, operates an acutely dysfunctional system which offers little regard for its anguished citizens.³⁸

Perhaps, the promoters of *Half of a Yellow Sun* were unaware of this basic characteristic nature of the country and with little or no grasp of what to confront when preparations began for the film's production. Alternatively, they could have been aware of these roadblocks but deliberately chose to ignore them. It could be that they similarly developed at some point what Ayo Sogunro referred to as the 'survival abilities' to carry on their task without hindrance.³⁹ Had the film's promoters of the faintest idea that *Half of a Yellow Sun* would be problematic right from conception, they would have exercised some discretion. Essentially, since the book itself was wholly set in Nigeria, there was a need to give the film adaptation as much Nigerian colour as possible. Producers deliberately employed the cast of international stars primarily to give the film

³⁴ ChatAfrik Network, "Half of a Yellow Sun by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie", October 30, 2011, accessed April 22, 2019, <http://www.chatafrik.com/special/spotlight/interview/half-of-a-yellow-sun-by-chimamanda-ngozi-adichie#.XMbyUKjTWyU>.

³⁵ Peter Bradshaw, "Half of a Yellow Sun Review – 'Well-intentioned and Heartfelt,'" *The Guardian*, April 10, 2014.

³⁶ Max Siollun, "How First Coup Still Haunts Nigeria 50 Years on," *BBC Africa*, January 15, 2016.

³⁷ Ayo Sogunro, *Everything in Nigeria is going to Kill You* (Nigeria: Shecrownlita Scribble, 2014).

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

an international outlook and possibly attract the global, particularly the Western, audience to a Nigerian and African content and secondly to secure international sales for investors.⁴⁰

Similarly, instead of shooting the movie in more tested and familiar locations in East Africa the producers selected Nigeria. They were “blazing a trail in a country that still scares off most potential filmmakers and investors” and since they wanted “to give investors’ confidence in a country that remains untested,” they picked international stars.⁴¹ Because the film is about a part of Nigeria and its peoples’ everyday struggles with a faltering postcolonial political superstructure, it would have been counterproductive to shoot the film abroad. An account indicates that the author, Adichie, had requested, should the book be adapted into a film, that the project must be filmed in Nigeria.⁴²

In any case, as the most expensive film yet made in Nigeria,⁴³ and having committed quite an impressive amount of human and material resources to the project, many had thought it would witness a smooth sail. Indeed, as the promoters appeared hopeful, they had little idea of what would soon confront them. By the time cameras were about to roll, typically unexpected roadblocks set in as well. The movie director, Biyi Bandele, captured this aptly;

While shooting the film in Nigeria two years ago [2012], there were times when we felt ensnared in impenetrable jungles of red tape, when we would be given the go-ahead by one arm of the government only to find our path blocked by the other arm.⁴⁴

The promoters had based its production in Calabar, the capital of Cross River state, southeast Nigeria and used the Tinapa Studios and Creek Town throughout the shooting of the film.⁴⁵ The studio, opened in 2007, fell into disuse few years later and this explains why the set designer, Andrew McAlpine, had to fly in experts from abroad to build the set in three weeks. There were serious challenges associated with the near absence of technical infrastructure. For instance, aside from the fact that lighting and grip tools had to be shipped from abroad, clearing them at customs were hampered by unnecessary bureaucracies which suspended production for a week. Jungle Filmworks and Audio Visual Services, a Lagos-based production services company extended support, but other local companies and service providers with expertise and logistics to complete a Hollywood production were totally absent. Again, in terms of its core financing, the

⁴⁰ “‘Yellow Sun’ Rises in West Africa,” *Variety*, July 28, 2012, accessed October 15, 2017, <http://www.variety.com/2012/film/news/yellow-sun-rises-in-west-africa-1118057146/>

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Sidique Bah, “Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie,” *Salt Magazine*, February 27, 2014, accessed May 15, 2019, <http://www.saltmagazine.org/chimamanda-ngozi-adichie/>.

⁴³ Luchina Fisher, “Nigerian Film Industry Reaches Mainstream,” *ABC News*, May 09, 2014.

⁴⁴ Biyi Bandele, “Why Can’t Nigerians see Half of a Yellow Sun?” *Premium Times*, May 23, 2014, accessed May 15, 2019, <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/opinion/161373-cant-nigerians-see-half-yellow-sun-biyi-banделе.html>.

⁴⁵ A scene in the movie was shot in London.

investment banker invited to seek funding for the film claimed that only ten percent of the budget was raised at the start of shooting in Nigeria. It would take four years before a fund was created to attract mainly local investors to finance the production.⁴⁶

Indeed, the filmmaker was said to have described the film location as apocalyptic and in fact, a significant number of the cast and crew fell ill from typhoid and malaria.⁴⁷ Bandele was himself down with Type 2 diabetes during the 33-day filming. Notwithstanding the challenges and nightmares, the filming of *Half of a Yellow Sun* was eventually concluded but once again faced even more unpleasant difficulties.

Driving a Stake through its Heart?

This section of the study discusses the perceived persistent denial of the political class to spur debates on the civil war. What we are attempting to do here is to look beyond the popular narratives at the time and see if *Half of a Yellow Sun* was deliberately fingered by the government for prohibition as a result of the film's content or lest it was part of the usual grand conspiracy to keep it out of circulation by political agencies. We shall take a look at the positions of both the Censor Board and the film's promoters to properly understand if politics was at play or if the latter had been guided by professional conducts.

At the premiere of the movie at the Toronto International Film Festival in September 2013, the Executive Director of the Censor Board at the time, Ms. Patricia Bala and her entourage were gladly present, and claims made that she was generally satisfied with the film. Indeed, the film had been premiered in Lagos on April 12, 2014, and to reach a wider audience, was scheduled for release two weeks later, precisely on April 25, 2014, when suddenly the Censor Board openly opposed such a move. According to the Board, selected parts of the film contained some objections, which needed to be resolved to conform to the laws and regulations and so certification was not approved. Did the 'laws' and 'regulations' that would help resolve the issue conform to those guiding Censor Board or superior to them? Answers remain hazy. In any case, the Censor Board may not have committed any crime in delaying or pending the premiering of the film, since the enabling act provides overwhelming powers to the Board to censure films not only believed to "undermine national security" and found "undesirable in the public interest", but also ones likely to "incite or encourage public disorder or crime."⁴⁸

Hostilities between the film's promoters and the Board began when it was alleged that the latter had 'banned' the film. The allegations stemmed from the fact that the Board had not only watched the movie at Toronto, but also expressed deep satisfaction with it. The general public,

⁴⁶ "'The Making of Half of a Yellow Sun Movie' – Executive Producer, Yewande Sadiku," *Encomium Magazine*, April 06, 2014. <http://encomium.ng/the-making-of-half-of-a-yellow-sun-movie-executive-producer-yewande-sadiku/> accessed May 15, 2019.

⁴⁷ Jenny Soffel, "'Half of a Yellow Sun': Thandie Newton, Typhoid and a Tale of Civil War," *CNN*, October 21, 2013, accessed May 15, 2019. <http://www.cnn.com/2013/10/21/showbiz/half-of-a-yellow-sun/index.html>.

⁴⁸ See Section 36 (1) (b) of the NFVCB Enabling Law ACT 1993, CAP N40 LFN 2004.

who had also joined in the debate, indicated that the Board had chosen to censure the movie because it feared ethnic conflicts may erupt.⁴⁹ There was no doubt, indeed, that the former was re-echoing similar sentiments by the latter which, in a statement claimed that its position towards the film was in pure terms “a routine procedure...underpinned by the superior logic of safeguarding [the] public interest.”⁵⁰ The movie director Biyi Bandele, one of the most vocal critics of the Board was alleged to have pushed the narrative of a ‘ban’ into the mainstream, but openly accused the latter’s stiff-position against certification of the film as “a clumsy, heavy-handed ban in all but name.”⁵¹ The question which arises here: was the film truly banned as claimed by Bandele and many others, or was the film’s delay by the censors board a ‘knee-jerk political response’ to what it believed were the film’s depictions of ethnically-motivated violence? Ms. Bala, and the Board in a separate press statement released to clarify the allegations, claimed that the film was NEVER banned and that such a word did not emanate from the Board.⁵² Ms. Bala also noted that as standard practice, movies that were deemed controversial were forwarded to the security agencies (DSS and Police) for a second and sometimes, a third opinion, whose advice in most cases guides the Board in their final decision to either ban or certify a movie. She cited an instance where popular Nigerian movie producer, Helen Ukpabio’s film, *Rapture* was banned by the Board based on the advice from the security agencies.⁵³ The author, however, learnt that the Board received several cases of films depicting scenes about persons representing a movement abroad, who travelled to Nigeria to bomb certain targets in the country, but were advised by the security agencies to be banned. The yardstick that certifies a film controversial was, however, not stated.

As mentioned earlier, there were indications that the Board had given strong support for the film at Toronto. This may not have been true, given the position by the head of the Board’s

⁴⁹ Some others claimed the movie was censored because of its nudity. See Onyinye Muomah, “Nigerian Film Board Delays Showing of Half of a Yellow Sun,” *Premium Times*, April 25, 2014.

⁵⁰ Caesar O. Kagbo, “Regulatory Agency Writes Exhibitor of ‘Half of a Yellow Sun’”, *NFVCB Press Release*, June 19, 2014.

⁵¹ Mr. Bandele initially agreed to sit for an interview for this article but later on he referred the author to FilmOne Distribution Limited, distributor of Half of a Yellow Sun. During the author’s brief interview with Ms. Patricia Bala, she accused Mr. Bandele of selling the idea of a ‘ban’ to the mainstream media. Bandele, nonetheless, disagreed, claiming that his reactions to all the issues came in response to journalists quoting her, or claiming to be quoting her. Interview with Ms Patricia Bala on October 19, 2017; Bandele, “Why Can’t Nigerians see Half of a Yellow Sun?”

⁵² Interview with Ms. Patricia Bala on October 19, 2017. Though Ms. Bala recently left the Board, her responses to the author’s questions were made not in personal capacity but as that of a former Board Executive Director. She later referred the author to direct questions to the NFVCB, refusing to go further with the interview. Kogba, “Regulatory Agency Writes Exhibitor of ‘Half of a Yellow Sun’”,

⁵³ Paul Ugor, “Censorship and the Content of Nigerian Home Video Films”, *Postcolonial Text* 3/1, (2007): 12. The author learnt that the Board received several cases of films depicting scenes about persons representing a movement abroad who travelled to Nigeria to bomb certain targets in the country but was advised by the security agencies to be banned.

delegation, who claimed to have expressed quiet reservations, having watched the premiering and manifested same when a filmmaker privately conveyed similar sentiments to her.⁵⁴ It must, nevertheless, be stated that this reservation was not about the film's storyline as the head of the delegation claimed, but its production or technical quality. It would appear that Ms. Bala, from all that had occurred at Toronto, decided to pursue a vendetta on return to Nigeria. This also may not be correct. The Board's Film Censorship and Classification department had been given the usual task of carrying out an in-house review of the film and seemed to have expressed parallel reservations as the Board's head. It was based on this, therefore, that the Board decided to further the process by forwarding the film for a second opinion.

Having established the above positions, we are compelled to ask two pertinent questions. One, was it possible that the so-called second opinion – the security agencies – could have expressed hidden prejudices against the film or its promoters in any way, given the heated conversation the delay had generated in public? We are likely to have no concrete answer to this, being that such tasks among security agencies are pursued discreetly. In any case, it is probable that the security agencies that are not adequately trained on 'artistic' matters of this nature acted based on the political atmosphere of the time. For a country renowned for pre- and post-election tensions, a film depicting war and reminding citizens of its brutal past, although the central theme was about love, may not have been positively received. Two, should there have been any form of pressure at the top level of government, was this decision based on the second opinion and ultimately the Board's discretion? Indeed, public opinion somehow influenced the eventual release of the film. In correspondences between the Board and FilmOne Distribution, the Board had requested the latter to edit certain scenes in the movie. Though the distributor in a meeting held on June 18, 2014, with the Board explained the financial consequences of having to edit, re-master, and reprint and "its resultant effect on the commercial viability of the film's cinema release in Nigeria",⁵⁵ these requirements were judiciously carried out. It was at this juncture that the Board later claimed no further response was received which may have spurred additional regulatory actions. They also noted that once this was effectively done, ratings would be communicated appropriately.⁵⁶ Although FilmOne expressed its dismay at the Board's posturing, both parties eventually arrived at a settlement. It is possible, however, that the Board's claim that it had not received any response from the distributor may have been a reputation-saving gesture, particularly it was likely that no prompt second and even third opinion was immediately received. Second, there were indications that two powerful government ministers mounted undue pressures on the Board to release the film, but the latter ensured that it awaited the expert opinion of the security

⁵⁴ Ms. Bala claimed that despite her strong reservations, she refused to express them to the foreign press in Toronto in order not to give a wrong impression or paint the promoters and Nigeria in negative light.

⁵⁵ For Press Statement by Kene Mkpuru see, BellaNaija.com, "Half of a Yellow Sun" Distributor replies NFVCB In New Statement" June 20, 2014. <https://www.bellanaija.com/2014/06/hoays-distributor-replies-nfvcb-in-new-statement/> accessed May 15, 2019.

⁵⁶ NFVCB Press Release.

agencies before acting on the status of the film in line with all the available options explored. Therefore, it is clear that neither the public pressure nor government influence but rather the opinion of security agencies and the Board's discretion together played a decisive role in the eventual release of the film for public viewing.

It appears that the Board did not act in the interest of the film's promoters, particularly its largely Nigerian investors. Negative reactions to the Board spread in some parts of the country, causing reactions that the board members were not sufficiently 'enlightened' to handle such a sensitive case and they were ridiculed.⁵⁷ A common notion within the Board and in movie industry circles suggests that the filmmakers did not follow due process and were simply interested in making a profit. This may not have been the case; it is likely that beyond the 'security' thesis, the Board's decision to deny certification to the film was informed by global practices where classification and censorship decisions are hinged on the cultures, beliefs, and attitudes of the society.⁵⁸

Half of a Yellow Sun, Censorship and National Contestations

Being the most expensive film in Nigeria at the time and one of the few movies in the history of the film industry adapted from an award-winning novel, starring an array of national and international stars, the movie created high expectations among Nigerians from all walks of life. The news of a banning or non-certification of the film, therefore, led to series of rumours, national debates/conversations and suspicions across the country. In a blistering article in *The Guardian*, Chibundu Onuzo argued that through the film, Nigeria needed to openly debate contesting accounts of her past and together come up with a consensus account on the civil war.⁵⁹ On Twitter, debates around unnecessary censorship, secessionism, ethnic-inspired pride among other conversations emerged following the actions of the Board. For instance, Lotanna Femi O. tweeting from the handle @TheLotanna, noted: "But it's sad though that large parts of the movie was allegedly chopped to 'preserve our unity.' Really stupid if that's true." Bolaji Olatunde from the handle @BOLMOJOLA said: "At the climax of the film, an Igbo lady to my left said, 'We don't belong to this country.' Mr. Censor, the film didn't inspire that." While a tweet from @SantinoED claimed: "Saw #HOAYS last weekend.. Never felt prouder being an Ibo man. We did have to start from the bottom again.. Look where we are now...", another by Alex (Oba n'ame) from @i_am_alexbrown said: "#HOAYS really sold out today, My room was so full, chairs had to be brought in."⁶⁰ Civil society groups also waded into the conversation. The Human Rights

⁵⁷ See, for instance, "The Miss World Tragedy," *Tell*, December 09, 2002, 31.

⁵⁸ James Fieser, "Censorship: From Moral Issues that Divides Us", *UTM*, January 09, 2017, accessed October 09, 2017, <http://www.utm.edu/staff/jfieser/class/160/4-censorship.htm>.

⁵⁹ Chibundu Onuzo, "Nigeria's History Problem Needs the Light from Half of a Yellow Sun," *The Guardian*, April 15, 2014.

⁶⁰ All tweets cited from "Resurrecting Biafra: Half of a Yellow Sun", *Saharareporters*, August 4, 2014, accessed on April 12, 2019, <http://www.saharareporters.com/2014/08/04/resurrecting-biafra-half-of-a-yellow-sun>

Writers Association (HURIWA), for example, argued that suspending *Half of a Yellow Sun* was simply “an attempt to deny the historicity of the Nigerian-Biafran civil war” and “amounted to ‘genocidal denial’ reminiscent of dictatorial regimes.”⁶¹

Apart from the inaccurate portrayal of historical events in the film and the debates that sparked a national conversation against the backdrop of the Censors Board’s request for specific scenes in *Half of a Yellow Sun* to be removed, there is a belief, particularly in the minds of many in recent times that it was time for a film of this nature and several others to serve as a catalyst for introspection and reflection on the Biafra war.

Conclusion

Although the author reached out to the Board several times for follow up interviews, unfortunately, it was blocked in the bureaucratic bottleneck. However, popular Nigerian online newspaper, *YNaija* interviewed an anonymous senior official at the Board on the issue; the senior official cited the general insecurity in the country for the Board’s action to deny the film certification. According to the official, “Is it not our job to ensure films don’t cause chaos? No one in government wants to be responsible for anything that happens now. The poor woman (Bala) is just trying to protect herself. All this noise won’t change her mind, unless a higher authority steps in.”⁶² When the above position is weighed side-by-side, it is possible that the Board was concerned that the film may likely have unearthed latent hostilities in the country.

Though little evidence exists to show that the Board was deeply biased or that its actions were exerted as part of a long political culture of silence over a heated issue as that of the Biafra war, yet, as Adichie aptly indicated, the Board could have overlooked the politics or ‘technicalities’ and embraced the film simply for its art.⁶³ Here, it is likely that many movie followers would have taken the film at face value with very little opportunities for second-guessing. In fairness to the promoters, *Half of a Yellow Sun* appears to have no sinister motive in its indication to premiere the film at the time it did. Indeed, there were fears that the film could be hit by piracy,⁶⁴ hence reasons for the decision to premiere on time. This decision, unfortunately, coincided with a period of serious regional and political tensions in the country. To be sure, the first half of 2014 witnessed a dramatic upsurge in violence in the Northeast sparked by Boko Haram. As it were, about 270 young school girls were seized by the group from the remote town of Chibok in Borno State, Nigeria. These events quickly sparked both a national and international outcry. It was in the midst

⁶¹ “Democracy Day: HURIWA wants Ban on Half of a Yellow Sun Lifted,” *Point Blank News*, May 28, 2014.

⁶² Chi Ibe, “Why ‘Half of a Yellow Sun’ is ‘banned’ by the Censors Board, DG ‘Expressed Strong Reservations’,” *YNaija*, April 27, 2014, accessed April 12, 2019, <https://ynaija.com/exclusive-why-half-a-yellow-sun-is-banned-by-the-censors-board-dg-expressed-strong-reservations/>

⁶³ Chimamanda N. Adichie, “Hiding from our Past,” *The New Yorker*, May 01, 2014.

⁶⁴ At the time the film was still being premiered in cinemas, several bootleg DVD copies of the film were simultaneously sold for a meagre fee in the busy Lagos traffic. See Funsho Arogundade, “Lagos Pirates Feast on Half of a Yellow Sun Movie,” *PM News*, August 18, 2014.

of these emotional outpouring and global outrage that *Half of a Yellow Sun* was billed to premiere. In fact, the Chibok abduction occurred two days after the Lagos premiere of the film. Of course, contrary to Ms. Bala's position that the film's release was a deliberate attempt to cause tension in the country, nothing appeared to suggest so. Nevertheless, it is not improbable that some of the 'grave' scenes portrayed in the film may have likely "encourage[d] public disorders" as feared by the Board.

While it is difficult to say exactly what the major consequences were for the film's promoters, either in terms of returns in profit or sustained investor confidence in Nollywood, it is very much possible, even so, that the Censors Board's actions may have driven a stake through the heart of the Nigerian film industry. Questions will continue to be asked on why the security agencies should be involved in deciding the fate of Nollywood movies and a work of fiction generally, given that they are not well-equipped for the job. There are also beliefs in some quarters that the Board does not have a deep and fitting understanding of ratings, censorship, and the film industry generally.⁶⁵ Whatever the case, it would perhaps have augured well if a film of this nature and other material expressions of the civil war had been used as a reference by the Nigerian state to mark the recent 50th anniversary of the war. At a time when mutual suspicions continue to heighten between peoples of the Eastern part of the country and leadership of the central government, *Half of a Yellow Sun* may not only have helped to heal old wounds but also be a useful tool to create a national reconciliation.

⁶⁵ See Press Statement by Kene Mkparu.

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