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**The Effects of War and its Implications in J.M
Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K* and
Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of A Yellow Sun***

آثار الحرب وتداعياتها في حياة وأوقات مايكل كي لجي م كويتزي
ونصف شمس صفراء لشيماماندا نغوزي أديتشي

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Abstract:

This article attempts to explore the different profound layers of meanings related to the consequences and implications of war in Africa as depicted in J.M Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of A Yellow Sun*. Both works are found to have described the dire economic, psychological and political effects war can leave on both the individual, in the case of Michael K, and the community in the case of Ngozi's work. The novels, however, differ tremendously in terms of their plots and the interactions between the characters inside them. Ngozi's characters are more akin to how individuals in real life would act in the context of war or conflict; while Coetzee's characters appear to be robotic and unearthly. Therefore, we can read Coetzee's novel as an allegory and a work whose meanings are related to profound philosophical concerns such as the burdensome weight of freedom.

Keywords:

Life & Times of Michael K; Half of a Yellow Sun; Coetzee; Ngozi; postcolonial, Bakhtin, war, freedom

المخلص:

يحاول هذا المقال استكشاف الطبقات العميقة المختلفة للمعاني المتعلقة بعواقب الحرب في إفريقيا وتدايعاتها كما هو موضح في رواية *حياة و أوقات مايكل كي* للروائي جي م كوتزي و رواية *نصف شمس صفراء* شيماماندا نغوزي أدبتشي. وُجد أن كلا العملين يصفان الآثار الاقتصادية والنفسية والسياسية الرهيبة التي يمكن أن تتركها الحرب على كل من الفرد ، في حالة مايكل ك ، وكمجتمع في حالة عمل نغوزي. ومع ذلك ، تختلف الروايات اختلافاً كبيراً من حيث حكاياتها والتفاعلات بين الشخصيات بداخلها. شخصيات نغوزي أقرب إلى الطريقة التي يتصرف بها الأفراد في الحياة الواقعية في سياق الحرب أو الصراع ؛ بينما تبدو شخصيات كوتزي وكأنها روبوتية وبعيدة عن الواقع لذلك يمكن قراءة روايته كقصة رمزية، و بأن عمله يحمل دلالات فلسفية عميقة كالمعاناة من ثقل الحرية المرهق.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

حياة و أوقات لمايكل ك؛ نصف شمس صفراء؛ كويتزي؛ نجوزي؛ ما بعد الكولونالية ؛ باختين ؛ حرب ؛ حرية

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INTRODUCTION

The works in question depict characters caught in the midst of social chaos; they cannot; however, be characterized

conclusively as war novels whose origins date back to epic poetry, though to some extent they show the heroic deeds of escaping an imposed new objective reality be it a nation-state to which not all the *nations* composing it subscribe to staying part of it; or an intruder's most racist system human beings have known in contemporary history. J.M Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of A Yellow Sun* each in its particular manner, given the socio-historical circumstances against which they were set, portray the effects of civil war on people's inner and outer lives. Yet, this social unrest and the factors behind it have plenty of implications such as an African feminist dream of enabling the 'subaltern' to speak or eradicating the dehumanizing *status quo* dictated by the apartheid system. An interdisciplinary approach is used to reach deeper layers of meaning implied by the depiction of war and its effects on both individuals and society. Postcolonial theory of literature exemplified by Homi Bhabha, Edward Said and Spivak along with Bakhtin's formalism are used to read the works in questions.

1. An Overview of the works

1.1 John Maxwell Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K*

Life & Times of Michael K is about the life of its protagonist, or anti-hero as some critics consider him, Michael K, in a kind of dystopian South Africa during a civil war. Presumably set in the 1970s, the novel introduces Michael K who carries the physical characteristic of having a cleft lip, is a simple, quiet and introspective man. Michael works as a gardener in Cape Town but decides to leave the city to find a better life for himself and

his ailing mother who has always considered him a burden and treated him as a handicapped person. Yet now he is the only family member she can rely on to take care of her. They embark on a journey carrying his mother on a sloppy rickshaw he built for this purpose to return to their rural homeland, but along the way, they encounter a landscape ravaged by war and engulfed in chaos.

As the civil war intensifies, Michael's mother falls ill and is admitted to a government hospital. However, the conditions there are deplorable, and Michael is unable to provide adequate care for her. Faced with the grim reality of the situation, he decides to leave the hospital and take his mother back to the countryside.

In the second part of the novel, Michael K becomes separated from his mother following her death and finds himself alone in a desolate and harsh environment. He begins to build a shelter for himself and cultivates a small garden for sustenance. Michael's solitary existence in nature becomes a metaphorical representation of his search for freedom and self-reliance amidst a troubled society.

Throughout the narrative, Michael K encounters various individuals who offer both assistance and hindrance to his journey. He is subjected to the scrutiny and control of authorities who seek to impose their will upon him. Despite the hardships and the oppressive society, Michael K remains resilient and focused on his quest for a *meaningful being*.

1.2 Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Half of a Yellow Sun

The story principally follows the lives of three main characters: Ugwu, a youthful rural community boy who becomes a houseboy for a university professor; Olanna, a young woman from a well-off family who leaves her comfortable life to live with her partner, Odenigbo. The latter is also a university professor who is a hardliner of mainstream politics in newly independent Nigeria; and Richard, a British emigrant who falls in love with Kainene, Olanna's twin sister.

As the political tensions rise in Nigeria and the Biafran region aspires for independence, the lives of the characters become intertwined in the unfolding happenings. The novel sheds light upon the characters' personal struggles (both internal and external), sacrifices, and losses they experience in the face of war and the dire ramifications it creates inside everyone's life.

Ugwu witnesses the violence of war and is enforced to grow up quickly as he becomes implicated in the Biafran soldiers' fights. Olanna and Odenigbo are faced with individual and relational challenges as their romantic dreams clash with the realities of war. Richard, the foreigner, grapples with his identity and his role as an observer in the midst of a civil war.

The characters start to suffer the consequences of war such as hunger, violence, and displacement. Because of their firsthand experience of the atrocities of war, they face the moral dilemmas of making difficult choices to be able survive. The narrative also explores the complexities of loyalty, betrayal, and the consequences of political divisions within a country.

The novel also explores the intricate human nature, betrayal, loyalty in relation to the political choices.

2. The Effects and Implications of War in *Life & Times of Michael K* and in *Half of a Yellow Sun*

Many critics such as Dominic Head (2006) and David Attwel (2015) agree that the novel was clearly influenced by Kafka's *The Trial*. The first obvious resemblance is the letter "K" for the protagonists' names, Michael K in *Life & Times of Michael K* and Josef K in *The Trial*. Coetzee didn't deny this influence, yet for him "there's no monopoly on the letter K" (cited in Head, p. 56). David Attwel argues that in writing *Life & Times of Michael K*, Coetzee was also said to have been influenced by *Michael Kohlhaas* written by the German Romantic novelist Heinrich von Kleist in 1810 which is about the post-enlightenment idea of freedom and how law and government could fail to protect people. Patrich Hayes argues that reading Kafka depends very much on the reader's view of him, even if the readings could be too contradictory as to claim comments such as "an atheist Kafka" as opposed, for example, to "a religious Kafka" by different critics. The reader interprets Kafka's texts according to his beliefs for "the humanist atheist Mme. Magny uncovers in Kafka a humanist atheist, the religious Max Brod discovers in him 'a sort of superior Max Brod'" (Hayes, 2010, pp.72-3). These contradictory readings are especially found when it comes to approaching texts that attempt to discuss themes like the nature of 'truth', which can be found in Kafka's works and Coetzee's as well. The way I read Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K* is that it represents the civil war in South Africa and even partly the author's involvement in it. On the other hand, the novel is an allegory in which the author endeavours *unconsciously* to transcend

artistically, to use Fredric Jameson's way of seeing things, this war and its racial implications by portraying the main character Michael K adopting a minimalist philosophy and trying to annihilate the *status quo* by dint of denial and gardening. Although Gordimer accuses Coetzee in his review of the novel of being a political liar because, for him, he portrayed Michael K, a character who doesn't represent black "heroic identity" (Hayes, 2010, p. 74), this very controversial characters can be viewed as a representation of a very wise 'native' of South Africa. Stylistically, somehow the name of the character is foregrounded in that the initials in his name alliterate with the only "ethnic tagging" (Attwel, 2015, p. 108) he is referred to with: 'CM' which means coloured male. Also, his disfigurement seems to be a symbolic representation of the black colour of south black Africans in the sense that he didn't choose to be carrying this remarkable trait yet he is judged and prejudiced against even by the closest people in his family, his mother, because of it. The apartheid system imposed a 'pass' on black Africans to be able to move in their own country just because they were black. So Coetzee seems to be saying that Michael K suffers the war and its economic and psychological consequences solely because he was different. Yet, in his own manner he tries to escape all this labeling (he is an outlaw according to David Attwel) and incarcerations by means of escaping each time these institutions and camps. The latter could be read in Foucauldian philosophy as establishment, just like hospitals in *History of Madness*, built for the purpose of incarcerating whoever is judged to be different in order to discipline or punish him. They are somehow the physical realization of ideas born out of other prior ideas which were almost their opposite. Mad people were seen as 'blessed' in Dark Ages, and then at the age of 'reason' they started to be

seen as ‘mad’ and dangerous. The search for power, dominance and interests are what actually drive the a *potential colonizer*, a colonizer or a dominant class to change, or even create where there was none, new thought, views and knowledge about a particular object, human being or an entire ethnic group or even nation.

Half of a Yellow Sun as mentioned earlier also portrays an African country caught up in a civil war (1967-1970) just after independence. As a result of the mass murder of the Igbo people in the predominantly Muslim Hausa North, Igbos of the South started their endeavour to found their own nation-state: Biafra.

The story beautifully depicts how this war is wrapped in and tangled with the lives of simple and elite people belonging especially to the Igbo ethnic group. As we read the novel we witness the abrupt change in the characters lives and the cracks that started to appear between strongly passionate lovers such as between Olanna and Odenigbo and Richard and Kainene on the one hand and even sisters; Olanna and Kainene. The daily partying and daily political conversations held amongst university teachers (Odenigbo’s friends) gave way suddenly to their displacement and separation. Obviously the novel can yield a lot of meanings and deeper layers of meaning can be reached if the postcolonial approach is applied to it. First, the novel can be read as hybrid, in Bhabha’s sense of the word which he explains in complex manner in *The Location of Culture* (1994), form which is meant to resist, subvert and escape the labeling of the colonizer (although it could result in ambivalence) of the former colonized and, using a feminist approach, the ‘double’ oppression that the black woman is subjected to by both the former colonizer male and the black male belonging to the same

‘traditional’ culture. As a bourgeoisie form of expression the novel as a genre is based on the idea to depict characters that are at odds with their immediate society. It is individualism which is more stressed in such an art form. However, Ngozi’s depictions of Igbo characters in *Half of a Yellow* can be read as, first, giving them a voice from inside a predominantly former colonizer’s art form; the novel form. Ngozi must very well have been aware and had at the back of her mind British cultural representations of Nigerians and Africans in general. She must have been aware of Conrad’s racist portrayals of black Africans in *Heart of Darkness* and Achebe’s reaction to him through his essay “An Image of Africa: racism in *Heart of Darkness*” (2016); she must have been aware of the movement of writing back, including Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1957), African writers have been involved in. Therefore, somehow Ngozi’s work can be added to the long list of African works of fiction which could always be read as subversive to the old stereotypes about black Africans. The process of representing and considering Africa as the antithesis of the west, as the antonym without which the word’s meaning cannot be known took centuries and huge amounts of books of fiction, encyclopedias and so on. Likewise, in order for African intellectuals and artists to dispel and destroy this invented image, tradition and Africa they would have to make at least the same efforts. Richard, the British expatriate, as a result is given an important yet at the same time minor role at the same time. The mimicry of black Igbo characters of western life and even talk can be partly read as a ‘complex of inferiority’ in Fanon’s sense of the expression (consider Ugwu’s use of the word master to address Odenigbo, for instance), yet the imitation can also be read as a form of resistance and subversion in Homi Bhabha’s sense of the term. Furthermore, we cannot miss the feminist voice in the novel in

the sense that Richard, the shy white British male, is made to seem ridiculous and stupid sometimes by Kainene. Also, this can be seen in the challenging and corrective remarks of Olanna to Odenigbo. The language used by Ngozi, therefore, can be said to be atypical to the manner whereby female writers had been known to express themselves, that is, using, for instance, less authoritarian expressions. Ngozi's voice which is meant to enable the subaltern to speak can also be said to be utilizing the strategy of the third, the liminal or the interstitial space in that it declines to identify with traditional women, from black males on the one hand and with white males and females on the other. This space made Ngozi imagine black feminism, which is more popular in the USA, using history or the past. In other words, in order to inculcate the change she aspires for (which she clearly states in her work *We should all be Feminists* (2014)) she has read the past through her consciousness as a feminist in the present. She portrays the traditional and modern character at odds with each other from within the ashes and debris of the war. The traditional woman is described in the manner of the epic poem written by the Ugandan poet Okot P'Bitek, *Song of Lawino and Song of Ocol* (1966). It is Odenigbo's mother in the novel who reiterates Lawino's cries against the black male who betrays and forsakes her for the sake of the modern woman (Olanna in this context). Somehow Ngozi's voice, because of her education, stands for both modern black males (the Ocols) and females. For the beautiful love story between Olanna and Odenigbo, depicted as being natural and justified, is endangered by the 'foolish and jealous' voice of the traditional woman.

The novel form, as Bkhtin would argue, fits the best the unfolding nature of absolutely an unpredictable life during the war. The 430-page work gives enough space (but less space than

say Tolstoy's *War and Peace*) to the writer to develop his characters and plot convincingly enough to look closely akin to a real life situation in a context of a war. The author also uses multiple voices in the novel. According to Bakhtin in his *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981), language is intrinsically polyphonic, meaning it contains multiple voices, perspectives, and discourses. Moreover, heteroglossia, Bakhtin's coined term, refers to the coexistence of diverse social, cultural, and ideological voices within language, and within the novel by extension. *Half of a Yellow Sun* is narrated through the perspectives of various characters like Olanna, Odenigbo, Ugwu, Kainene and Richard. Those narrators were all given the absolute power of the omniscient narrator to know and describe the events and the characters. There is also another narrator which is handed over the role of storytelling and is given full access to the characters minds and hearts. These multiple voices all agree, though, to the atrocity of the war and its dire effects on them. They all witness and narrate their horrors they are made to see: killings before their eyes and gruesome scenes of blood and violence. Be they Hausa or Igbo, Muslim or Christian, whether they are for or against the war, characters in the novel are all depicted to have suffered the consequences of the war. The different voices show us as well how it is not possible sometimes to compartmentalize the characters (thus people in real life) as for or against or foe and compatriot. Mohammed, Olanna's ex boyfriend and a Muslim male helps, for instance, an Igbo girl to escape death.

3. Comparative Remarks on the two Works

Both Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K* and Ngozi's *Half of a Yellow Sun* portray characters that are caught up in and suffer the consequences of war. But the way they cope with the

dangers they are exposed to differ. For while Michael K adopts a minimalist philosophy in which he is content with gardening and even getting water out of a well using a spoon, Olanna, Richard and others try to stay alive escaping battle zones or bombarded areas. Michael K, however, questions philosophically the essence of his acts. For his for the time being is escaping institutional incarceration is enough besides gardening. *Half of a Yellow Sun*, on the other hand, adopts a communal, collective concern as regards the fear of death and complaint about the ‘silence’ of the world while the Igbo were being killed and left to starve. What is remarkable, still, is that Coetzee is a white writer who could have been seen by black South Africans at time (or even today in some parts of South Africa) as a colonist, an intruder, a privileged being. We also sense in his work the indirect allusions to race or to the apartheid system. While reading the novel actually we feel sometimes that the setting is a totally dystopian unknown location. Therefore, it is hardly possible to approach the work as pertaining to any real war that took place anywhere. Yet, Ngozi’s work describes without a shadow of a doubt one particular war: the Biafra war in Nigeria. We also feel that the relationship inside Ngozi’s work are very much close to reality while in Coetzee’s they seem, including, Michael K, like a robot-like beings who have almost no feelings to show to anyone, except the want to cause damage, chaos, rampage or to escape death and stay hidden from seen and alive with little means. Perhaps it is the allegorical nature of the work that imparts its characters with such traits. Michael K’s resistance by means of gardening stands for a virgin land cultivated by a native, a totally utopian world which no longer exists. Except for the rare occasions of conversations in Coetzee’s work, *Life & Times of Michael K* could be compared to *1984* by George

Orwell where descriptions of the Big Brother, what it makes people do and say and its slogans are almost unearthly. Still, Michael K could be seen as an individual burdened with freedom in a Sartrean sense even though he is supposed to have very little freedom given the war context.

Conclusion

The works discussed in this article were both written by African writers. However, they differ greatly in describing the consequences of war on individuals and communities. While Coetzee's work can be read more safely as an allegory or even as a dystopia, Ngozi's novel is realistic, based on true events and full of human feelings such as love, betrayal, loyalty, fear and hatred. Yet, although difficult to come to terms with what 'truth' Coetzee is trying to shed light on, it is clear that his work is very profound and still has many layers of meaning that await as yet more critical approaches done especially through interdisciplinary lenses.

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