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CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE: A STUDY OF  
HER SUBJECT MATTER AND RECEPTION  

NATESHIA WANAMAKER  
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Reviewed and approved* by the following:  

Karen Weekes, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of English and Women’s  
Studies Thesis Supervisor  

Valeria Harvell, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of African American Studies  
Honors Adviser  

* Signatures are on file in the Schreyer Honors College.
Abstract

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a Nigerian writer who explores areas of social inequality for people of color through her writing. In her three novels, Purple Hibiscus, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, and *Americanah*, Adichie challenges social norms in both Nigeria and the U.S. by directly addressing racism, sexism, and classism. Unlike many Black women authors of the past, Adichie has received overwhelming approval from the literary community as well as the general public. Even though addressing similar subjects, Zora Neale Hurston, Michelle Wallace, and Alice Walker experienced backlash from the Black community as well as criticism from their contemporaries. Adichie’s approach is straightforward and confrontational, raising awareness of the issues within the Black community, yet she has had more success than these women. Using analysis based in reception theory, this thesis proposes that Adichie’s success lies in the readiness of her audience to read a work like hers while also comparing the reception of Adichie to that of other Black women writers.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a Nigerian novelist whose writing challenges the status quo. Adichie’s writing discusses many social problems involving inequality, and questions societal conflict in a manner that raises consciousness and confronts societal norms. Her novels explore racism, identity, class, social inequality, and sexism. In particular, Adichie’s books discuss the inner workings of the Black communities of both Nigeria and the United States, focusing on their treatment of women and religion and the effects of class stratification. Her works speak to the less attractive side of Black culture as her characters experience it throughout Purple Hibiscus, Half of a Yellow Sun, and Americanah, her three novels. Historically in the United States, Black women have been met with resistance from both the literary and Black community when writing on the sexism and misogyny that they witness and experience. Black women writers have historically been criticized for presenting Black people in an unfavorable way and sensationalizing Blacks’ lifestyles. Furthermore, they have been charged with creating art that divides the Black community and vilifies the Black man. In contrast, Adichie has been met with overwhelming approval. All of her book-length works are well-received and critically acclaimed. Her works have been adapted for film and are reprinted in many different countries and languages. She has not experienced the censorship and denigration of character that the women writers before encountered.

There are many possible reasons for this change in reception to Adichie as opposed to Black writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, Michelle Wallace, and Alice Walker. Most plausibly, the plight of these earlier Black women and others like them readied Adichie’s own audience. The twenty-first-century critic seems ready for that which the twentieth-century critic and general public alike were not: a Black
woman with something else to say besides the prescribed topics concerning race. Previously, readers may have been put off by Adichie’s writing, and perhaps they still are. However, we are long past the time when it was socially acceptable to limit an artist to certain subject matter.

Adichie is a creative writer and essayist who explores a wide range of cultural and societal issues in her writing; she writes about culture in the United States and in Nigeria in such a way that emphasizes parallels as well as drastic differences between the two, highlighting the negative and positive aspects of both. Adichie’s experiences throughout childhood and into adulthood enable her to write about culture in these countries from the perspective of one who really knows what it is to be Nigerian, or to live in America, rather than writing as one who has simply travelled or observed life in these countries. Adichie is able to more accurately compare and contrast the two cultures, rather than, for example, unfairly appraising America’s culture from the perspective of a Nigerian new to the customs of American life. Adichie gives in-depth descriptions and particulars of Nigerian living and what it is to be Nigerian. She also goes into detailed accounts of one’s experiences of coming to America and trying to adjust. Adichie’s set of experiences along with her writing skill work together to articulate a unique point of view. She uses her experience, like any skilled writer, to present new perspectives and truths to her Nigerian and American audiences.

Adichie was born to college-educated parents of Igbo descent on September 15, 1977. Her father, James Nwoye, was a professor of statistics at the University of Nigeria, the first university that Nigerians started independently of England. He later became the school’s vice-chancellor. Adichie’s mother, Grace IfeomaAdichie, studied sociology in school and was the University of Nigeria’s first female registrar. And while Adichie’s family’s hometown was Abba, Anambra State in Nigeria, she grew up in Nsukka, the town designated to employees of the University of Nigeria. Early on, Adichie was introduced to reading and began writing. She read from primarily British writers and styled her writing after theirs. At the age of ten, she began reading African writing. Adichie has described this switch as fundamental to her development as a writer. She felt that Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart “taught [her] that [her] world
was worthy of literature...and gave [her] permission to write [her] stories” (“305 Marguerite” 13). The African writers that she read led her to understand that her writing could mirror her own experiences. As a young reader, she was delighted that she would no longer have to write stories of girls that “lived on McIntosh Lane with dogs called ‘Socks’... That spent a lot of time drinking ginger beer” (“305 Marguerite” 12).

Adichie excelled in her studies, completing her primary and secondary education at the University of Nigeria School. She won several awards for academic excellence and described herself as on the “academic track” that led to medical school. In her essay for The World Split Open: Great Authors on How and Why We Write, she writes, “When you do well in school in Nigeria, you’re expected to become what we call ‘a professional,’ which means a doctor” (“305 Marguerite” 13). Studying pharmacy and medicine for a year and a half reinforced her feeling that the medical field was not for her. She began to get serious about pursuing a writing career. In 1997, she finally decided to move to the United States to attend college. In that same year, she wrote a collection of poems entitled Decisions published by Minerva Press. Adichie studied communications at Drexel University in Philadelphia. During this time, she wrote a play, “For Love of Biafra,” on the Nigerian civil war. After two years at Drexel, Adichie transferred to Eastern Connecticut State University in Connecticut, where her sister Ijeoma lived and had a medical practice. During her time in Connecticut, Adichie published several short stories and essays and began working on her first novel. She graduated summa cum laude in 2001 with a degree in Communications and Political Science and began to gain recognition in the literary community.

Adichie’s first novel was well received on an international level, winning her many awards and commendations. Adichie went on to obtain her masters in Creative Writing at John Hopkins University in Baltimore. From there, she was granted a teaching fellowship from Princeton University in order to support her writing projects. Directly following, in 2006, Adichie enrolled in a master’s program in African History at Yale University. During this time, she was still publishing essays and short stories and also published her second novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun*. After the publication of this novel, Adichie began
actively encouraging literacy and writing in the Nigerian community and promoting her book worldwide. Since then, Adichie has written *Americanah*, her latest novel, and a collection of short stories composed of revised, previously published works and few new stories. Now, she divides her time between living in Nigeria and in the United States.

Adichie’s life clearly gives her experiences both in Nigeria and America. Adichie grew up in the educational community, coming into contact with the political, social, and economic woes that surrounded education in Nigeria. She learned English, but also had a foundation in Igbo language and culture. Once in America, she studied in and travelled the East Coast, being introduced to American culture while also gaining a different perspective from which to view Nigerian culture. Adichie’s writing is reflective of having experienced multiple cultures; it reflects an open mind and is able to capture varying cultural perspectives with nuance. Her American characters are not written with the exotic undertone sometimes attributed to characters that are ethnically or racially different than their writers, and her Nigerian characters are not written with an ethnocentric bias that the Nigerian way is the “right” way. She has a clear, unbiased point of view. She is not merely writing what she sees; she leads her reader to feel and understand as she does. Her views are her own and not merely adopted from her parents or instituted from her upbringing.
Chapter 2: Readings

Adichie’s foci and topics in her three novels take a clear stance regarding societal and cultural problems plaguing Nigeria and America as well. Her first novel, *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), is set in Nigeria and focuses on the Nigerian family and community. In *Purple Hibiscus*, Adichie focuses on a fifteen-year-old Igbo girl, Kambili, following her maturation and the evolution and the eventual dissolution of Kambili’s once-structured family unit as she struggles with her attitude towards and feelings for her father. Her father, Eugene, is a highly respected businessman and community figure, who practices an extreme form of Catholicism. Through Kambili’s experiences with her father, mother, brother, and aunt, Adichie’s reader learns the inner workings of contemporary Nigerian culture as Kambili lives through it: both the good and bad.

Kambili is a respectful, humble, and docile child who is mindful of her parents and wants their approval. And while they appear to be the model family, one learns very quickly that everything is wrong for this family. Eugene is physically abusive, which causes Kambili’s meek and submissive disposition. Her father’s dominance and high expectations deter her from forming friendships, as he maps out a strict studying schedule that allows little free time. His insistence on humility and modesty subdues Kambili’s spirit and leaves her terrified to do anything other than what he instructs. She rarely speaks and has trouble connecting with her peers. She lives in fear and questions everything that she does. Her father uses Catholicism as a tool to terrorize and oppress his family. His grace prayers for dinner often go on until the food is cold. Kambili must cover her hair and cannot embrace her adolescent beauty, lest she be seen as ungodly. The family must look to Eugene to manifest their faith in the way that he deems socially appropriate. Everything is done only with his permission. Kambili’s mother has suffered many
miscarriages from his abuse and has no outlet for her suffering. Kambili’s father alienates his family from the rest of their relatives as well as their neighborhood, community, and church. Eugene’s standards for his family don’t allow them to mix with his father with his “pagan” beliefs, or with his sister, Ifeoma, and her spiritually liberated attitude. Kambili, her brother Jaja, and their mother have no friends nor outlets free of Eugene’s rule. He literally schedules his children’s time, save for a few hours a day during holidays.

Aunty Ifeoma’s home and presence bring a whole new aspect of Nigerian life to Purple Hibiscus. Ifeoma is bold, loud, intelligent, educated, and self-sufficient. She indulges her physicality by wearing makeup and adorning her hair with jewelry. She is a professor at the University of Nigeria and a widowed mother to three. Ifeoma practices Catholicism in a fashion that loves and gives, as opposed to the oppressive quality of Eugene’s faith. Her children are quite free, full of spirit and self-determination. They practice autonomy and have influential roles in their household. And, unlike Jaja and Kambili, they have a relationship with their grandfather despite his traditional African beliefs. With Aunty Ifeoma, Kambili attends a pagan celebration while still fostering beliefs that bad will come of it, but finds that nothing occurs but a carefree, pleasurable outing. Kambili meets her grandfather and learns how to act without her father’s strong guidance. Throughout her time at Aunty Ifeoma’s, Kambili learns to make her own decisions and develops her personality. Kambili breaks from many of her childish behaviors that Eugene endorses to keep his family submissive. She finds an appreciation for her own beauty and strength and feels romantic attraction for the first time. Everything that felt shameful and obscene at home feels right at Aunty Ifeoma’s.

During her visit at Aunty Ifeoma’s, Kambili learns that every family is not like her own. Once away from home, Kambili and Jaja cannot return to their former selves and behave in their old ways. At Aunty Ifeoma’s, Jaja and Kambili begin to fully understand the abuse, oppression, and intolerance that they experience at home with their father. They learn a different kind of love, religion, tolerance, support, and family as Aunty Ifeoma counters the perverse way of life that Eugene had taught them. Prior to
visiting with their aunt, Kambili and Jaja only knew abuse and oppression. Their visit to Aunty Ifeoma’s is a turning point for both Kambili and Jaja in their maturation. Without it, there was no way for them to conceive of the wrong experienced at home, and no motivation to desire change. Aunty Ifeoma’s influence allowed Kambili to grasp the extent to which her oppression affected her after being urged to speak for herself, and to appreciate her beauty. Adichie expresses the power of perspective born from new experiences.

This is what Adichie has to offer most profoundly in her writing: she can see about a culture what most cannot. Only by seeing it from a different viewpoint can one fully appreciate the character of one’s own culture. An occurrence as apparently simple as visiting a neighbor or relative’s home can be groundbreaking in what one can discover and learn about themselves as well as their neighbor.

Her character Ugwu in Half of a Yellow Sun has a similar disorienting experience when he comes into town from the country for the first time. And again, in Americanah, Adichie incorporates the technique of juxtaposing perspectives. Adichie stresses in her writing: your way is not the only way, the right way, the necessarily dominant nor prevailing way. It is just a way. In her writing, she simply points out each culture and shows them what they are doing.

In Adichie’s second novel Half of a Yellow Sun (2006), she brings her reader into a family with troubles as problematic as that of Kambili’s. And as with Purple Hibiscus, Adichie explores more of Nigerian life through the happenings in her novel. Set before, during and slightly after the Biafrain war, Half of a Yellow Sun demonstrates racism, prejudice, and discrimination at a time of social, political, and economic upheaval for Nigeria. Adichie also explores infidelity, religion, betrayal, love, sexuality, puberty and adolescence, marriage, education, family, the treatment of women, and language, as these topics pertain to Nigerian culture and social cues. The novel follows the lives of five main characters: twin sisters Olanna and Kainene; their respective partners, Odenigbo and Richard; and Ugwu, Odenigbo’s house servant. Ugwu enters Half of a Yellow Sun almost as the reader does, journeying into the
unfamiliar, uncertain what one may find with a title like *Half of a Yellow Sun* from a little-known author. As with Kambili’s experience at Aunt Ifeoma’s home, everything is new for Ugwu. And like Kambili, Ugwu is confronted with many social changes in his new environment.

At the same time that Ugwu’s experiences with Odenigbo are rivaling those of his former life in the country, the audience is experiencing this representation of Nigerian life in relation to their own culture. If the reader is Nigerian and lives a life similar to Odenigbo’s, the reader sees their surroundings anew through Ugwu. An example is Ugwu’s response to seeing landscaping for the first time: though ordinary for the people of the neighborhood and many other middle-class dwellings around the world, hedges strike Ugwu as particularly odd,

Ugwu points to how strange the hedges are, “trimmed so flat on top that they looked like tables” (*Yellow Sun* 3). He goes on to describe how orderly the homes are, sitting “side by side like well-dressed men” (*Yellow Sun* 3). Here, Adichie uses simile to demonstrate how differently any two places are culturally and even physically; while a place’s inhabitants can find their surroundings commonplace or naturally occurring, a newcomer might find them exotic and even bizarre. Just as Odenigbo treats Ugwu as a stranger, Ugwu’s thoughts express how strange he finds his new home.

Adichie opens *Half of a Yellow Sun* with this episode, signaling that this novel, like her previous one, will be about new experiences in some form. Each character enters into a new phase of life that highlights some negative aspects of Nigerian life. Through Ugwu’s experiences at Odenigbo’s home, Adichie reveals how dismissive the Europe-educated treat “village people,” as visitors of Odenigbo call Ugwu. Odenigbo urges Ugwu to learn the ways of the British and to obtain a classic education, while still retaining his reverence for his Igbo upbringing. Odenigbo tries to fill Ugwu with his unique mix of customs to replace his old ones. Through Ugwu’s education from Odenigbo, Adichie also shows the superiority that some Nigerians feel towards Whites and the European portrayal of Western history and
knowledge. Odenigbo feels that Nigerians are better-informed and know the real truth of Nigeria’s history. While Odenigbo is a sympathetic character, he is not without his own prejudices.

Adichie also shows the religious beliefs of the “bush people” and their customs as Ugwu reflects on his times at home and incorporates his beliefs into his life at Odenigbo’s. While Odenigbo disregards the potential power of his mother’s rituals and medicines, Ugwu becomes increasingly suspicious and fearful that she might successfully undo Odenigbo’s and Olanna’s relationship. Just as Adichie uses Ugwu to display the beliefs of “bush people,” she later uses him to reveal the harsh realities of war: the normalization of and callousness towards death, killing, and rape. Ugwu, though still a child in many ways, is thrust into the war and loses his sense of humanity as he kills often and, under pressure from his peers, ultimately rapes a woman. Ugwu becomes “numb,” carrying out his duties, feeling disillusioned by what he imagined the war to be and feeling that his death is imminent. Like Ugwu, other characters become disillusioned by the actuality of Nigerian life during this time period.

Through Richard’s, Kainene’s boyfriend, experiences, Adichie reveals the racial and discriminatory practices going on within Nigeria. The English living in Nigeria hold many prejudices against the Nigerian people, while the Nigerians exhibit the same tendencies. Richard comes to Nigeria to study Igbo-Ukwu art. Many English people warn him away from Nigerians, describing them as manipulative, uncivilized, and unclean. Susan, a woman whom he is initially involved with, finds nothing threatening about Richard conversing at length with Nigerian women (ironically, since he ultimately leaves her for a Nigerian), but the two have fight viciously over Richard’s speaking with English women, which she fears indicates interest or attraction. However, similarly to the attitudes that Richard witnesses in Susan and her peers, Richard experiences racism with Kainene as well. Madu, a major in the army and a friend of Kainene’s, refuses to accept Richard as Kainene’s boyfriend and rejects all of Richard’s attempts to connect with him over Nigerian politics and culture. While not overtly offensive, like his friend Major Ekechi Udodi, who claims that Kainene disgraces herself with a white man, Madu shares in his sentiment. Initially, one could conclude that Madu is opposed to Richard, finding him guilty of
exoticizing Nigerian culture with his interest in Nigerian art and in Kainene. Once Richard learns Igbo and speaks it to Madu, and Madu still rejects him by choosing to speak English back to him, it becomes evident that Madu is intolerant of outsiders and has reservations about Europeans’ motives. The war effort brings the two men together and quells their racial tension as Richard writes for the war effort, using his white privilege to reach a broader audience.

Olanna’s perspective focuses on the Nigerian family unit and the male/female relationship, and what plagues Nigeria there: the second-class treatment of women, infidelity, jealousy, procreation, and love. Olanna is a striking, voluptuous Igbo woman born to wealth and opportunities. She is twin to Kainene and daughter of a powerful businessman, Chief Ozobia. Olanna is generally not recognized for her intellect, but instead manipulated and spoken of solely in terms of her beauty. Okeoma, a friend of Odenigbo’s, calls her a “water mermaid” (Yellow Sun 62). Her father tries to use Olanna’s beauty as a lure to close business deals with other chiefs and powerful men. In turn, Olanna’s physical attributes put her at odds with many of the women in which she comes into contact. Men only see her beauty and her potential for marriage and motherhood, and women feel threatened by her looks.

Olanna and Kainene have a particularly strained relationship because of Olanna’s beauty. Odenigbo’s mother is displeased by Olanna and Odenigbo’s affection for her and seeks to actively destroy their relationship because Olanna proves most unlike her: a village woman. Miss Adebayo, another of Odenigbo’s intellectual friends, immediately assesses Olanna as her competition even though Odenigbo showed no attraction for her even before his relationship with Olanna started. Miss Adebayo marvels at her “illogical beauty” and teases her perfect English accent (Yellow Sun 61). Olanna constantly battles with those around her who see her only in terms of her physical appearance. Compared to the coming war, Richard’s trying to find a place in the Nigerian world, and Ugwu’s learning and becoming a scholar while also overcoming his experiences in the war, Olanna’s plight may appear superficial; but this speaks to the significance of the superficial in the second-class realm to which women are sentenced. Furthermore, Olanna’s character succumbs to what many accuse her of being—purely
physical—once Odenigbo betrays her by impregnating Amala, a plan set up by his mother. Olanna lashes out, using her physical attributes to lure Richard, not only to seek revenge but to prove her superiority to her sister. In the process, Olanna and Kainene’s relationship is ruined. Throughout this turmoil, Olanna and Kainene find themselves able to ally themselves with their partners once more, but not with one another. And as Olanna seeks forgiveness as she forgives Odenigbo and accepts his child, she does not seek to reconcile with his mother, who hurt her as she hurt Kainene.

The treatment of women in Nigeria conflicts with the idea of sisterhood and unity while the men achieve solidarity throughout the book. The camaraderie that men can participate in is limited for women as they fight for the affection and attention of men. Olanna is seen only for her beauty; thus her family does not recognize her as a strong member of their family as they do Kainene, who takes a huge role in the family business. Odenigbo’s friends don’t include Olanna in their conversation, and while Odenigbo’s mother does not take issue primarily with Olanna’s appearance, she finds her lacking the background to be a good mother for Odenigbo’s children. Because Olanna was not raised in the same way as Odenigbo, his mother plotted to separate the two. Olanna’s only sanctuary is in the village at her aunt’s home, where she finds the strength to overcome the way that she’s been treated, and become a more worthwhile individual. Through Olanna’s treatment and her subsequent behavior, Adichie demonstrates the difficulty of women to unify in a patriarchal culture where so much emphasis is placed on women’s appearance and relationships with men.

Through *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Adichie confronts the issues of race relations, relationships both familial and intimate, as they exist in Nigeria and for her characters. Through the course of the novel, Ugwu, Olanna, and Richard learn, like Kambili and Jaja in *Purple Hibiscus*, to work through their preconceived ideas of family, success, and love to better traverse the circumstances to which the war brings them.
Adichie’s newest novel is *Americanah* (2013). Like her previous novels, *Americanah* portrays everyday living in Nigeria and her characters’ experiences with Nigerian culture, but here Adichie’s protagonist’s traveling to America allows a depiction of American culture as well. In *Americanah*, Adichie juxtaposes American culture with that of Nigeria. Adichie focuses on the life and development of a young Nigerian woman, Ifemelu, as well as her boyfriend Obinze. Ifemelu goes through school experiencing the class, race, gender inequities of Nigerian culture. She has a home life full of turmoil and seeks refuge with her aunt and with Obinze. Upon entering adulthood, Ifemelu ventures to America for further education, where she can attain more opportunities than in Nigeria. Through Ifemelu’s development in Nigeria and journey to America, Adichie’s reader becomes familiar with Nigerian life as Ifemelu experiences it as well as American life experienced by an adult African immigrant, perhaps even as Adichie herself experienced it.

More than Adichie’s other novels, *Americanah* addresses racism, classism, and sexism. Perhaps these elements are what the United States and Nigeria share the most. Adichie bluntly criticizes both cultures, particularly through the use of the blog that Ifemelu creates once in America, which tells anecdotal stories highlighting many negative and race-fueled interactions in America. Throughout Ifemelu’s childhood, class, race, and sexism continuously create the circumstances that many women experience. Ifemelu’s family is poor and unstable, so she seeks refuge with her aunt Uju and boyfriend Obinze. Aunty Uju is an important character, as she introduces Ifemelu to many of the class-, sex-, and race-based inequities of both Nigerian and American society. In Nigeria, Aunty Uju is trained as a doctor, but finding it difficult to secure work, she reduces herself to being a wealthy man’s mistress. This she sees as her only way to attain employment in her field, as well as wealth and love. Still, Aunty Uju’s life is less than secure. Her lover, the General, never gives her money in hand and pays for things as they come. Ifemelu fears for her aunt, but infidelity seems an acceptable way of life to many of the women that Aunty Uju encounters and almost essential for some women’s survival and security. Following the
General’s sudden death, Aunty Uju is stripped of her comforts and ultimately moves to America for a new start with their young son.

In America, Aunty Uju’s actions once again introduce Ifemelu to society’s harsh realities. Aunty Uju warns that her son, Dike, “will be behaving like these black American children” if he spends too much time with them (Americanah 137). She explains to Ifemelu that Blacks in America are different than Nigerians and that Nigerians are superior to them, a concept that she insists that Ifemelu “will understand with time” (Americanah 137). Even during Ifemelu’s childhood involvement with Obinze, she navigates class and race and how they influence and predict her status in life. Ifemelu is intelligent and hardworking, but unpopular in school. Once her relationship with Obinze solidifies, she finds her status elevated. He is lighter skinned and has money. Color mattered back in Nigeria; however, Ifemelu encounters many racially fueled interactions in America, which make her truly feel “Black” for the first time once there.

In Ifemelu’s school in Nigeria, complexion determines to some degree one’s perception by others. A lighter complexion makes one more beautiful or more coveted. In America, complexion is even more determinant. Race and ethnicity decide much more than one’s level of attractiveness. They may decide what job one obtains, if one can obtain a job at all; they influence one’s perceived competence and intelligence, one’s supposed temperament and background. Even how one “performs” race is a point of division in America. Do Black women embrace their race by going “natural” in their hairstyling, or seek to be more “American” by relaxing their hair and wearing it straight? Each decision influences the job one might secure, the friends one will make and the romantic relationships one will acquire it. Cultural questions such as these cause strife for Ifemelu as she tries to adjust to American living. Even more so, the attitudes and prejudices that some American have towards Africans such as Ifemelu make it difficult for her to survive.
American ignorance of contemporary Africa is almost Ifemelu’s undoing. People expect her to be uneducated. Her roommates are cold towards her, assuming they share nothing in common with her. Ifemelu has a hard time finding a job. And as she traverses American life, she finds that she too is guilty of racist thought and actions. Race bombards Ifemelu in America. It is inescapable. It is central in most of her American interactions. More devastating, however, is Ifemelu’s discovery that her sex works together with race in deciding her fate in America.

When Ifemelu’s job search proves fruitless, she answers an advertisement for a tennis coach looking for a “massage,” and becomes deeply depressed by her actions and the financial predicament that guides her choices. Her male counterparts have difficulty finding jobs, but not as absolutely as she. When she dates, she notes that, once again, light-skinned women with relaxed hair are preferred for American men. There is an emphasis on being thin, light, and straightened. Her friend from childhood, Ginka, now lives in America and has become almost anorexic; she marvels at Ifemelu’s naturally slim form, which was less than desirable in Nigeria. Ginka claims that American men will love Ifemelu’s shape. While Ifemelu is being urged to meet American standards of beauty, she also receives backlash from African men that she encounters. A cab driver claims that she seemed American in the skimpy way that she dressed. Ifemelu is caught in the middle of trying to appeal to American customs and trying to retain Nigerian ideals of beauty and appropriate dress for women. The plight of women, specifically Black women, becomes especially clear with the issue of Ifemelu’s hair.

For a job interview, Aunty Uju’s friend urges Ifemelu to take out her braids and straighten her hair for appearances. The straightening process is painful and ultimately leads to Ifemelu’s hair falling out. Eventually, Ifemelu decides to revert back to her braids despite what that look might suggest to others. Through Ifemelu’s trials, Adichie critiques societal pressures that force women even to undergo pain to conform and stay in fashion. Much of the novel is framed within the salon where Ifemelu is getting her hair braided for her return to Africa, signifying the topic of female beauty prevalent throughout Americana and its ramifications for Ifemelu.
Through *Americanah*, Adichie emphasizes the impossibility at times for women to meet the standards of society to ensure that their basic needs are met. Both in America and Nigeria, Ifemelu and other female characters have trouble surviving socially, economically, and politically while almost all of their male counterparts experience much smoother fates. Race is also at the heart of many of Ifemelu’s conflict throughout *Americanah*, especially in many instances between Black people. Adichie focuses on Black-on-Black relations as well as situations between Black men and women. Inter-racial conflicts are secondary to issues within the Black community and between Blacks of different nationalities and ethnic backgrounds. Ifemelu experiences problems with her skin color and shape in Nigeria as race and complexion dictate status. In America, Ifemelu’s dealings with race become compounded as she seeks to meet the expectations of White Americans, African Americans, and Africans in America, as well as non-African Blacks. Adichie emphasizes this pressure disproportionately on women in *Americanah* and seems to suggest that is it a struggle borne by men and women unequally.
Chapter 3: Background

Adichie’s quick rise to popularity and success is overwhelming evidence that critics as well as the general public had positive receptions to her books. Adichie’s first novel, *Purple Hibiscus*, was published in 2003. At the time of publication, Adichie was all but unknown in the literary community. Upon publication by Algonquin books in the United States, and Kachifo Limited in Nigeria, both of which are smaller and/or independent publishing companies, Adichie gained recognition worldwide. In 2004, Adichie received the Hurston-Wright Legacy Award, was nominated for the YALSA Best Books for Young Adult Award, was shortlisted for the Orange Prize for Fiction, and was long-listed for the Booker Prize. In 2005, she was awarded the Commonwealth Writer’s Prize for best first book and best book overall. She received positive critical reviews and response in the United States, Nigeria, and throughout the world (Tunca).

*Half of a Yellow Sun*, Adichie’s second novel, was even more successful. Six years after its publication, a film version was released starring prominent African and African-American actors. As with *Purple Hibiscus*, *Half of a Yellow Sun* won Adichie many accolades. She was nominated for the National Book Critics Circle Prize in 2006, and received numerous other awards. More than *Purple Hibiscus*, *Half of a Yellow Sun* is revered for its political and historical basis in the Biafrain War. Adichie is recognized for the importance of *Half of a Yellow Sun* in the narrative of Nigerian history and for the impression made on her international audience.

Like *Half of a Yellow Sun*, *Americanah* was warmly received and is set to have a theatrical version released as well. Unlike the first two novels, much of *Americanah* is set in the United States. In *Americanah*, Adichie tells the story common among those immigrating to other countries: a story of displacement, of longing and desire, and of disappointments. Upon its publication in 2013, she was met
with immediate success. *Americanah* was named one of the ten best books of 2013 by *The New York Times* Book Review and also made the Top Ten Books of 2013 for BBC. *Americanah* won the 2013 National Book Critics Circle Award and was shortlisted for the Bailey’s Women’s Prize for Fiction in 2014. In addition to this, Adichie was listed among the “100 Most Influential Africans 2013” in *New African*, the “Leading Women of 2014” by CNN, and the “100 Most Influential People” by *Time* magazine for 2015. Adichie’s focus on American culture and immigration in *Americanah* has seemingly bolstered more recognition. However, one critic claimed that *Americanah* is first a story focused “unapologetically on love and self exploration” (*Americanah* [book review]), finding fault not only in Adichie’s portrayal of immigration to America, but in her method of storytelling.

Adichie’s writing confronts her audiences with its inclusion of the negative cultural aspects of American and Nigerian life. She shocks her reader with her daring subject matter, while challenging them to deny her assertions. Adichie’s background and knowledge of her subject matter grants her the authority and credibility to speak on these subjects. Writers and historians are often charged with vilifying or exoticizing other peoples and cultures that they don’t really know, understand, or appreciate fully. These writings appear less credible for their foundation in ethnocentric ideals and the racist and discriminatory characteristics that make caricatures of their foreign characters. Adichie is Nigerian and writes about Nigeria, and she is also a person of color writing about her experiences with race. She also writes about women within these cultures and their experiences contrasted with that of men’s. Adichiedoes not vilify one race or gender, but brings forth situations where different ethnic groups play both victim and victimizer, and where male and female victimize one another. Although Adichie tries to play fair in highlighting varying perspectives in her conflicts, her novels are still problematic not only in their essence, but also in her exposing the goings on of Nigerian and American culture to one another as well as the rest of the world.

Adichie writes for an international audience. Her writing caters to an American audience as much as it does her Nigerian reader. She is in tune with both audiences’ cultures and interests and writes to help
each learn from and understand the other. In essence, she is putting each country’s social issues in a spotlight for the other—or any others—to examine and criticize. In addition to spotlighting the customs of these two cultures, Adichie also writes about gender issues within those cultures that women of color historically have experienced backlash for addressing.

Adichie’s writing doesn’t shy away from taboos, but highlights them. Dating back at least to the Harlem Renaissance, Black American writers have used their writing as a platform to address racial, socioeconomic, and political concerns of people of color. It has become an expectation that Black writing will present these topics; but Adichie’s writing is much more than a piece on racial inequality. Adichie’s writings discuss many issues within the Black Diaspora. However, women of color are not strictly members of one minority group, but at least two. Like many Black women before her, Adichie writes about the human experience without sole emphasis on the villainy of white people and other authority figures. More specifically, her writing also addresses sexism, which despite having a longer history than racism, is less visible and more socially sanctioned because it is so ingrained in most contemporary societies.

Historically, in the Black American community, women writers have had difficulty when trying to write about the problems they face. If they make a Black character, and especially a Black man, a villain, they may face difficulty with Black readers. Dating back to the Harlem Renaissance, Blacks have been urged by sociologists such as W.E.B. Du Bois to “stick together” and put on a united front in order to further the civil rights of Black people. However, this united cause does not always help the Black woman or further her agenda, as many laws are designated for men, while women, Black or otherwise, have to wait to be granted those same rights. And not all writers wish to write for a political purpose, or one that coincides with current trends. Adichie writes about human experience in the many ways that it manifests; like the women before her, she focuses on more than race. Her writing gives close attention to the mistreatment of women of color by men of color, but also by men in general through acts of infidelity,
abuse, oppression, rape, and possessiveness. Adichie also includes situations where women of color harm one another.

Her strongest message seems to be about “black on black” harm, particularly in Americanah. She highlights the ways that, in both the US and Nigeria, families, friends, acquaintances, classmates, neighbors, strangers, and coworkers can hurt, offend, and discriminate against one another. Adichie’s writing can be seen as a betrayal: to Blacks in America, to Nigerians, to Black men, and to Black women. She does not simply write that families hurt one another: she describes specifically how Nigerian families may hurt one another in their misguided use of religion and in their employment of elitist and sexist ideologies. She does not simply explain how strangers can misjudge or hold prejudice against one another: she details incidents of Nigerians having strong negative views about African Americans, about African Americans finding their own features superior to Blacks of other countries, and of Jamaicans blanching at having someone confuse them with Blacks of another nation. Because Adichie belongs to so many groups, she is in the position to understand and know the feelings of so many minority or ethnic groups whose agendas or needs conflict. Her subject matter is unflinching in representing evil and wrongdoing in society. Almost no social concern of the black community is neglected.

In the past, African American women have had trouble finding publication and approval with their peers when writing the truth of the Black woman’s experience, for inviting the world into the Black home and community without first “cleaning it up” and making it look good.

Black American audiences have generally been unforgiving to Black women’s writing when it focused on issues within the Black community rather than standing up for the Black community in its pursuit of civil rights and equality. In contrast, men have been granted more liberties within the artistic community to criticize characteristics ascribed to men. African-American women have a long history of being sexualized, dehumanized, and objectified, not only by American society as a whole, but
overwhelmingly by Black male writers, artists, and musicians writing of women as things equivalent to vices such as alcohol and gambling. Women are not treated to these same liberties.

Zora Neale Hurston, a novelist and anthropologist who published four novels and over 50 short stories, essays, and plays, found herself ostracized by the Black literary community. She was eventually alienated to such an extent that she could not find avenues of publication or work as a writer. This was a surprising outcome given her auspicious beginnings: she started with writing for her college publication Stylus, and then moved to New York for further education, writing alongside Alain Locke and Charles S. Johnson, two intellectuals who were both connected with the Harlem Renaissance. She was central to the movement for a time, working alongside Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, and Wallace Thurman. During this period, Hurston worked for publications such as Fire! magazine and collaborated on projects with Langston Hughes, while publishing much of her own writing. Hurston also researched and published anthropological work on Black folklore in North, Central, and South America. For a time, she was positively and warmly received.

After the publication of her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, her peers questioned her merit as a writer and anthropologist, as well as her moral character. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* explored gender roles, oppression, and superstition within the Black community. It followed the journey of a young woman searching for an identity outside of the traditional marital status. Hurston’s subject matter strayed from the social “Uplift” and “New Negro” ideals that many of her contemporaries put forth in their writings to forward Blacks as a people and portray them as moral and intellectually adept. Hurston’s contemporaries and friends questioned her accuracy in portraying Southern Black communities, claiming that she made caricatures of Black people to entertain a white audience. Richard Wright wrote: “The sensory sweep of her novel carries no theme, no message, no thought. In the main, her novel is not addressed to the Negro, but to a white audience whose chauvinistic tastes she knows how to satisfy. She exploits that phase of Negro life which is ‘quaint,’ the phase which evokes a piteous smile on the lips of the ‘superior’ race” (Kraut). The *Crisis* magazine, created by W.E.B. Dubois, criticized Hurston for her
perpetuation of “Negro primitivism” in order to advance her own literary career (Kraut). The Journal of Negro History complained that her work on voodoo was an indictment of African-American ignorance and superstition (Kraut). The authenticity of her anthropological work was questioned as well; Hurston was accused of fabricating research and plagiarizing others’ works. She was even arrested on unfounded charges of child molestation. From this point, she fell into obscurity and died twelve years later.

Posthumously, Hurston received many awards and accolades for her writing and achievements in the anthropological field, once Alice Walker spearheaded a revival of Hurston’s work. After successfully locating Hurston’s grave in 1973, Walker wrote a piece featured in Ms. Magazine entitled “In Search of Zora Neale Hurston.” Since her reemergence in the late twentieth century, Hurston’s writings are widely respected, taught, and anthologized, though she outraged many in her time.

Like Hurston, Michelle Wallace received backlash for her inclusion of feminist ideologies. Wallace is a Black writer and feminist and renowned cultural critic and professor of journalism. She worked on Newsweek and Ms. Magazine prior to writing her novel Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman (1979). The novel discussed sexism in the Black community and in Black Nationalism. Wallace explored stereotypes of both Black men and women, but criticized Black men for accepting “White” society’s notions of manhood that served to oppress Black women. Many of those who worked on publishing the novel refused to be publicly associated or credited with it, especially her editor. Wallace was charged with being divisive in the Black community and with trying to drive a wedge between Black men and women that “didn’t exist” (Moore). Feminists such Angela Davis and even Wallace’s mother, the artist Faith Ringgold, criticized her work: not for its discussion of sexism, but for its value and factual content. They found that Wallace’s assertions lacked historical facts and were full of opinion presented as sociological information, and devoid of real critical analysis, wrote The Village Voice: which ironically enough was a magazine for alternative voices. The Black Scholar, a journal of black culture and politics, published articles claiming that Wallace’s novel was a biased attack on Black manhood lacking a male voice (Moore); though arguably, much writing by Black men lacks a female voice. Some likened it to a
rant, found it repetitious, and questioned Wallace’s character and intellectual capabilities. As with Hurston’s experience, the Black community began to attack her personally (Moore). Despite these attempts to discredit Wallace, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* stands as a prominent example of Black feminist writing that has since been celebrated in both the Black and feminist community. Her novel attracted the attention of both Gloria Steinem and Alice Walker, and in 1979, Wallace was featured on the cover of *Ms. Magazine*. Since her novel’s publication, Wallace has been the editor for *Essence* magazine and a writer for *The Village Voice*, *Newsweek*, and *The New York Times*. She has also taught at many universities, including Cornell and Rutgers.

Alice Walker, another Black woman writer, was also charged with painting an unjust portrayal of the Black man. Like Michelle Wallace and Zora Neale Hurston before her, Alice Walker was an activist and feminist writing to challenge the treatment of not only African Americans in America, but of African-American women. Her most notable work, *The Color Purple*, while critically acclaimed and winning the Pulitzer Prize in 1983, caused much controversy with the general public and her literary contemporaries. Many claimed that she “represented black manhood at its ugliest... [and sought only to] make a feminist statement on black men rather than portraying genuine black life” (West). Furthermore, others felt that her portrayals of Black men reinforced animalistic and cruel stereotypes about Black masculinity (West). Jacqueline Bobo notes, in “Black Women’s Responses to *The Color Purple*,” that television journalist Tony Brown called the film,

“The most racist depiction of Black men since Birth of a Nation,” while Ishmael Reed, a Black novelist, referred to it as “a Nazi conspiracy.” Adverse criticism rests on the following: the film does not examine class, portrays black males as harsh and brutal, and depicts black people as perverse, sexually wanton, and irresponsible. In sum, the negative critics contend that the representation is stereotypical. (43-51)
Critiques such as these overshadowed Walker’s purpose in exposing mainstream America to the struggles of the African-American woman, and in combating the dehumanization of the African-American woman in books and in film. Unlike Wallace and Hurston, Walker’s morality and personal integrity were not questioned; still, her motives for writing pieces such as *The Color Purple* were the main topic of discussion rather than the subject matter itself.

Reception theory, a branch of Reader Response criticism, asserts that one’s reception, that is the general public as well as critics' response and overall feeling towards one's work, has a basis in social climate and relates directly to what is perceived as correct to a certain people during a particular time in history. Reading is not objective, but is subjective to the social norms that dictate a society’s moral code. No writing has universal meaning and no writing can be judged without cultural bias and influence. As an example, a book such as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* can be acclaimed at its time of publication; denounced through an era of extreme racial tension; and found admirable once more, despite its racial/racist elements, as a necessary reflection of American history. In each of these time periods, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* falls in and out of the realm of what Reception theorists call the Horizon of Expectations, the accepted and prescribed subject matter of a certain period. Reception theory looks at the response that a book evokes and also considers what elements signify the author’s purpose for writing. This approach gives some focus on the motives of the author. Furthermore, it looks for elements of a work that coincide with the current cultural norms and ones that are potentially problematic for the reader as they conflict with what is socially acceptable at that time. But above all, Reader Response criticism gives power to the reader in deciding the meaning of a work.

This textual approach may seem like commonsense, but this line of questioning and thought shows the shift from Formalist ideology to one that focuses on the reader and his or her contemporaneous society. Formalist criticism relies heavily on outlining a text’s universal meaning as well as its universal themes and motifs. Reception theory, along with others such as Marxist, psychological, feminist, and New Historian criticism, takes a work’s circumstances, date of publication, changes in societal norms,
and the reader’s background into account when considering that work and one’s response to it. A piece of writing therefore never stagnates in its meaning or relevance, but always changes and acquires a new relevance, even if only as a measure of its time of publication.

Assessing Adichie’s reception following her first novel and subsequent novels makes productive use of Reception Theory’s assertions, especially concerning the Horizon of Expectations. As explained in the next chapter, Adichie’s audience is quite different than that of Hurston’s, Wallace’s, or even Walker’s.
Chapter 4: Contrasts in Reception

Following the publication of Purple Hibiscus, All Africa News published an article entitled “Chimamanda ‘Writes’ for African Voices.” The article focuses on the merits of Adichie as a Nigerian writer and discusses her subject matter. The article praises Adichie’s awareness of Nigerian ethnic issues and the challenges that women in Africa face. Additionally, it commends Adichie in her likeness to Achebe in considering the legacy of colonialism in Nigerian; it also notes their likeness in discussing colonialism’s creating religious unrest in Nigeria, and in discussing the complexities of Christianity’s manifestation in Nigerian culture, while also celebrating Igbo culture. Lastly, the article praises Adichie’s inclusion of Nigerian politics in exposing the corrupt nature of some Nigerian leadership. The article emphasizes the importance of Adichie as a Nigerian author with her opportunity to write about Nigeria and give them voice and relevance in the twenty-first century literary community.

Likewise, Kwame Dawes, a Ghanaian native and liberal arts professor in the United States, writes positively on Adichie and her first novel. Dawes finds central to the novel a psychologically traumatized person journeying to maturation and acceptance of her abuser. Dawes appreciates Adichie’s shedding light on both the negative aspects of colonial order and the idealization of western culture, which disrupted the traditional customs of the Igbo people. Dawes asserts that Adichie’s protagonist reconciles her father’s teachings with the traditional practices of her aunt, Aunty Uju, in a way that demonstrates her growth without condemning Western culture, men, Catholicism, or Nigerian society. Dawes praises Adichie’s “confident prose charged with emotional intelligence—the literary sophistication of her use of symbols and metaphors, and of her engagement with deeply political and ideological issues.” He claims that her book is of family first, but underlined with larger ideological issues of African culture, making
her book light enough for entertainment, but thoughtful enough to classify as a serious piece of writing. Most prevailing is Dawes’ delight in Adichie’s new and compelling voice, and his desire to hear more.

Western media also emphasizes the coming-of-age tale that Adichie tells. In *Purple Hibiscus*, Adichie gives a window into Nigerian culture through Kambili’s classic Bildungsroman. *The New York Times* Hartl describes *Purple Hibiscus* as a story of a girl suffering inner turmoil over her feelings for her father, resulting from his multiple personas. At home, he is a tyrant often inflicting physical and mental abuse on his family in the name of Catholicism. He uses his wealth to alienate and punish his family and ostracizes his father for his pagan beliefs. In public, he is a benefactor always giving to his people and standing up for them against a corrupt government. Hartl cites Adichie’s writing as "riveting" and "straightforward", perfect at capturing the human spirit in Kambili’s subtle maturity and resolution that allows her love and devotion to her father without giving in to his tyrannical and abusive nature.

*The Guardian* (United Kingdom) published a short review urging those looking for an informative and engaging read to read *Purple Hibiscus*. David Newnham, a freelance writer for The Guardian, found *Purple Hibiscus* a joy to read, but deceptive in its simplistic nature. According to Newnham, Adichie gives “gravity” to Nigeria’s, and indeed all of Africa’s, social and political issues without making *Purple Hibiscus* a factual account or work of nonfiction. More to the point, the review cites *Purple Hibiscus* as engaging and not only a good laugh, but a journey through exploration and growth. Both *The Guardian* and *The New York Times* articles write about *Purple Hibiscus*’s being much more than some “tell-all” book for readers to delve into Nigerian living. Furthermore, these publications recognize the universal message within. Kambili, like many American women protagonists, journeys into womanhood within the span of the novel. Unlike the maturation of the man, women often discover and realize the restrictive quality of society for women in contrast to the mobility to that of the man. Therefore, coming of age for the woman often involves finding what freedom she might, reconciling her goals with what is possible, and accepting the second-class status that is designated for the woman. This strays from the typical male journey to self-discovery. The coming-of-age narrative is different for
women in current society. That difference isn’t resented or denied, but celebrated in Adichie’s portrayal of Kambili’s journey. Additionally, Adichie’s assertions are accepted not only by her western readers, but her African reader as well.

The African media outlets appreciate Adichie most for her ability to speak on Nigerian culture. She writes well and has a unique perspective; but prevailing is her unique position to reach the American and international reader. She can make them read about Nigeria. Dawes sees Adichie’s opportunity to bring Nigerian subject matter to the forefront. His stance is representative of most other African critics (cf, Adesokan, Bell-Gam, Wilkinson). Adichie writes on African issues, but she does not satirize Nigerians in order to entertain Americans. She does not make primitive or exotic the behaviors of her people. Even Eugene (Kambili’s father) receives a fair treatment from Adichie. He doesn’t simply act as a plot device for Kambili, but has his own struggle and turmoil to wrestle within the narrative. For this, Africans and critics support Adichie’s writing, as it presents multifaceted perspectives on this family’s situation. Anna-Leena Toivanen’s essay “Daddy’s Girls” demonstrates Adichie’s “fair” assessment of family relations in the post-colonial era of Nigeria. Toivanen finds that Eugene

is a profoundly complex character: on the one hand, he is an aggressive home tyrant who causes mental and physical injuries to his family; on the other hand, he is also officially a “good Christian,” a successful businessman, and the fearless owner of a magazine that criticizes the flaws of the military government. In short, he is a respected social figure in the eyes of his colleagues, relatives, and congregation. As the owner of the Standard magazine, the father represents someone who “dares to tell the truth” and who “sp[eaks] out for freedom” ([Purple Hibiscus]5). In his private life, however, truth and freedom are not afforded to others: abusing his patriarchal authority and silencing his children define his fatherhood. (106-136)
Many African and American critics note the political and social aspects of Adichie’s writing. They draw on its postcolonial allegory and give her much credit for her portrayal and extensive knowledge of Nigerian culture.

Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, written in 1982, did not receive the same reception, though it spoke to the same topics as *Purple Hibiscus*. *The Color Purple* featured a female protagonist as well as a cast of strong female characters experiencing the character development, growth, and change usually designated for male characters. The novel focused on the maturation and coming of age of a Black woman named Celie in post-slavery America. Like Kambili, she is oppressed, and abused (in Celie’s case, sexually) by her father with no source of help in her predicament. Throughout the novel, Walker explores the idea of male dominance granted by patriarchal societies. The oppressive nature of the church and its teachings is also discussed. Celie finds her voice and freedom, as does Kambili. However, Kambili’s is a story celebrated upon publication, while Alice Walker, despite winning the Pulitzer Prize for her novel, had to wait years for complete acceptance. The Color Purple was treated as an assault on men for its featuring empowered women prevailing over men, its prevalent rape narrative, and its calling attention to the Black church as a patriarchal structure designed to uplift Black men and suppress Black woman’s sexuality and freedom. Walker, in *The Color Purple*, celebrates women assuming male gender roles and acting assertively towards the male characters in the novel. Where *The Color Purple* was criticized for its portrayal of men, *Purple Hibiscus* is praised for highlighting Nigerian life and the African voice despite the subject matter. *Purple Hibiscus* is recognized primarily for its coming-of-age tale weaved within; and while *The Color Purple* has many of those same coming-of-age elements, not even this is acknowledged. In contrast to the attention given Kambili’s journey in *Purple Hibiscus*, Celie’s maturation was overshadowed by critics’ attention to the treatment of the Black male.

Unlike Hurston or Wallace, Adichie received support in the literary community as well as the Black community. And while she relied heavily on feminist ideology, and focused on the oppression of women through societal institutions such as the church and family unit, *Purple Hibiscus* was well
received. Adichie benefitted from a fate much different and more gratifying than these two women and other writers like them: possibly owed to the efforts of the women writers before her. Adichie herself expected indifference following her publication. In an interview with Daria Tunca for the ChimamandaNgoziAdichiewebsite, when questioned on the success of *Purple Hibiscus* and its being well received across age, gender, and nationalities, she answered “I really don’t know why *Purple Hibiscus* has done relatively well. I hoped for success but was prepared for indifference—I like to think that both form and theme have contributed—I like to think that you finish reading because you want to rather than because you ought to.” Furthermore, Adichie, when missing home, wrote a “feel good” story about growth of a young girl devoted to her father, while also questioning his values (The ChimamandaNgoziAdichie Website).

Adichie achieved her goals for the writing in large part. One aspect of Reception Theory discusses the power that an author has to put into a book what she wants its reader to receive. Here, Adichie’s theme of growth and maturation beats out oppression, religion, race, and sexism. These themes prevail throughout, but are not Adichie’s main goal, to which many critics responded. Conceivably, Adichie’s writing style and intended topic led to the success of her novel and its overwhelming acceptance. But realistically, the social climate in the twenty-first century in Nigeria and in the United States granted Adichie freedom to explore “taboo topics” such as abuse without having her validity as an author questioned. Adichie’s tone in writing *Purple Hibiscus* condemns as absolutely as did *The Color Purple* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* the male oriented society that grant men authority and power to oppress women at will, while also offering few resources for women.

Early in *Purple Hibiscus*, Adichie wins her audience with her use of Kambili as the narrator and witness to the horror that is her family’s reality. Unlike Celie in *The Color Purple*, Kambili is unaware of the oppressive nature of her lifestyle. She is a naive and ignorant to the ways of most others. Her father’s way of living is her only measure of life. As her maturation commences, the depth of her abuse unfolds. Adichie, through Kambili, exemplifies the oppressive nature that can sometimes be the manifestation of
Catholicism, rather than “complaining” of Kambili’s abuse.” Perhaps Adichie’s unassuming delivery is instrumental in her success rather than Alice Walker’s more direct introduction to Celie’s suffering. Her success could also correlate with her timing. *The Color Purple* emerged at a much more sensitive time for race in America. Celie may have been a character written as unassuming as Kambili. Perhaps no woman “complaining” or telling her story could have been seen as innocent in her motivation. There seems to be this balance one must create between what is accepted, what is controversial, and what is essential for the advancement of culture and society and revelation. That same balance is also struck in her next novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun*.

In an article written for the *Women’s Review of Books*, E. Frances White praises Adichie’s ability to draw readers into the “daily terror and brutality wrought by [the Biafran] war” by adding the personality that the stories of Ugwu, Olanna, Kainene, and Odenigbo bring along with other elements of Nigerian life and conflict. It is the inclusion of these additional aspects of Nigerian life that White finds catching of one’s attention with the characters' ability to relate and share in experience with Adichie’s reader. While White agrees that the subject of the Biafran war is a necessary and traditional topic of Nigerian writers, Adichie approaches the subject anew, giving one much more than merely the impression of historical fiction. Ugwu comes of age at the hands of the war and matures in intellect as he becomes familiar with the westernized aspects of Nigeria as Odenigbo introduces Ugwu to the world of a revolutionary and intellectual. Olanna and Kainene’s relationship mirrors that of Nigeria and Biafra in their futile differences that find them opponents. And, Richard grows from someone who wants, but fails to demonstrate his appreciation and respect for those that are different than he, to one who finds a purposeful way to achieve that goal. White argues that Adichie uses these characters to integrate stories of class, religion, love, maturation, exotification of the eastern world, nationalism, and more to create this fullness of text that relates to her reader in a multifaceted way. It is this that makes Adichie a standout in the literary scene. Others such as Heather Hewett and Erica Anyadike share in White’s sentiment.
Anyadike, a writer for the *Sunday Times* in Johannesburg, South Africa, applauds Chimamanda Adichie for her work and depth of research done for *Half of a Yellow Sun* and its accurate and invaluable portrayal of the Biafrain war, but points to other attributes for *Half of a Yellow Sun*’s success. In her article entitled “The Sun is Half Full” Anyadike writes that Adichie’s achieved success with her “deft skill and compassion with which she draws her characters, her nuanced approach to Africa, her refusal to succumb to pessimism and portray Africa as a continent without hope, without love, without a future.” Anyadike favors Adichie’s straying from this oft-told tale of Africa. Furthermore, Anyadike commends Adichie’s portrayal of the ordinary within the larger context with its disappointments and “giddy happiness” that presents as impactful as many of the scenes of war and violence in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Adichie also impresses Anyadike with her presentation of country life and tribal religion without suggesting that Africans who haven’t converted to Christianity are superstition or ignorant. Adichie does not favor nor denounce Christianity. When Olanna shares with Odenigbo about Ugwu’s feeling that Odenigbo has been bewitched, Odenigbo ignores Ugwu’s fears while Olanna defends Ugwu’s beliefs, finding his beliefs “no more irrational than belief in a Christian God [one] cannot see.” Anyadike ultimately finds Adichie’s novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* an illustration of “How to write about Africa [in the way that Africa deserves] ...in her refusal...to portray Africa as a continent without hope, without love, without a future.”

Heather Hewett, another writer published in the Women’s Review of Books, wrote on Adichie’s subject matter in *Half of a Yellow Sun* and found Adichie deserving of acclaim and unique in her approach. She explains that Adichie is brave enough to write everyday life stories rather than the grand narrative of war, genocide, and victimology that has become the mainstay of [African] books that eventually become popular in the west—Adichie unabashedly presents stories that neither reassure nor comfort Western audiences but rather explore the continuing impact of unequal power relations on literature itself.
Here Hewett also points out Adichie’s divergence from the norm. *Half of a Yellow Sun* does not beg for sympathy, nor does it terrorize its readers with an onslaught of violence. Hewett credits this in large part to “the development of new publishing houses and collectives, literary magazines, and writing networks (many of them with online components) [that] have provided space and encouragement for emerging voices.” Hewett questions whether Adichie is telling something startling and new, or whether publishing changes have just created greater access for those diverging from the typical narrative. Wherever the answer lies, Hewett finds Adichie’s range impressive as well as her ability to evoke a complex assortment of feeling in her reader.

Most other African publications agree with these assessments and find Adichie’s portrayal of Africa refreshing and powerful. All Africa news published an article entitled “Africa’s Best Literary Flower” praising Adichie’s “beautiful prose” comprised of a “combination of incredibly vivid, flowing sentences of remarkable simplicity and depth” that also informs the world of Nigeria. Another called her a “growing literary prodigy” and described her as writing from the heart of Nigeria. African critics, writers, and the general public appreciate her candid writing style that packs a “punch” and does not try at diplomacy when creating her characters and portraying interactions among them. They also find her fearless in taking on the subject matter of the Biafran war.

*Half of a Yellow Sun’s* success and Adichie’s growing popularity seemed rooted in her attention to the Biafrain war initially, but all the reviews point to Adichie’s writing style as the ultimate key to her success. However, *Half of a Yellow Sun* received much more critical acclaim than *Purple Hibiscus*, but *Purple Hibiscus* had all other elements of Adichie’s style. To what, then, can we credit *Half of a Yellow Sun*’s popularity not only with the general public, but with literary critics as well? Arguably, *Half of a Yellow Sun*’s success partly lies in its place along Adichie’s literary journey with her being more seasoned and known.
Another area of departure from the treatment of Black women authors of other time periods shows in the way that each review and critic treats Adichie herself. No one critiques her as a person, nor do they question her skill or the plausibility of her writing. Her novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* portrays some of the worst in the Nigerian, British, and American peoples. Almost all audiences applaud her candid speech and point to her background as further endorsement of her assertions on the war and its effect on the Nigerian people. Both of her grandfathers died in the Biafrain war, she mentions in many interviews. This made her feel compelled to write on the war. This fact is often retold in subsequent reviews and essays to give weight to her involvement in the war. Additionally, critics comment that Adichie has done extensive research. In comparison, these other women writers’ credentials were ignored.

Following the publication of *The Color Purple*, the general public took issue with Alice Walker’s portrayal of men and white people as discussed previously (Ch. 3). They questioned Walker’s slant view of them portraying no redeeming qualities in men or white people in her novel. Almost every Black woman in *The Color Purple* suffered tremendously from the fallout of the slavery system and the position they held inferior to Whites and men in America subsequently. In reality, Alice Walker was a Black woman born of other Black men and women who surely suffered in America. The treatment of Black people, especially Black women was no kept secret. By extension to the allowances given Chimamanda Adichie, Alice Walker could write on this time period as she saw fit. However, no one gives credit to her background as a source of truth for the novel. She did not need to write characters in a more satisfying and inclusive way for all readers, but in the way that supported her message.

Regarding research, critics often exclaim at the depth of research required to write *Half of a Yellow Sun* as Adichie has. Zora Neale Hurston’s writing was met with a different reception. Her contemporaries questioned her research and accused her of fabricating research. And while she was from the South, unlike so many of her peers of the Harlem Renaissance, they disputed her representation of that region. Hurston’s writing did not fit the expected paradigm, and neither does Adichie’s. Adichie says the hard and the uncomfortable, and at times the things almost too hard to read, but receives accolades and
film adaptation’s. Even her best characters commit rape or infidelity, or act in racist ways. The women and men whose plight Adichie draws attention to commit acts that mar their character. But Adichie does not find herself like Hurston, unknown and unwanted, discredited and vilified.

Perhaps because Adichie is Nigerian and not American, she has experienced a better reception. Americans can look to Half of a Yellow Sun for entertainment value, while Nigerians favor her writing as well. Are they simply happy to have relevant writing on their country? Adichie writes in a progressive time when the culture of minorities is more respected. People want to hear what alternatives voices have to say. People want to open up their ears to the things they pretended not to know before, and the things they ignored. Post-Colonialists and New Historicists focus their research on finding the voices once silenced and ignored, in order to paint a fuller picture of the past. The treatment of Americanah leans toward the change in times more than any other suggestion. Because, even in instances where the critic finds fault with her book, they give her a legitimate critique; this treatment strays from the unfair treatment of the Black women before her.

A book review on All Africa news describes Americanah as having “an endless subplot of extreme inter- and intra-racial tensions rooted deeply in western culture”. The author also describes Americanah as “dull” and “disjointed”, especially in the part preoccupied with Obinze and Ifemelu’s love story. The author finds the middle disjointed from the rest, and the entire text forced examination” of race and prejudice fueled by differences in “accents, education, music, diction, art, diet, religion, politics, class, and fashion.” The author names this long list to indicate the endlessness of Adichie’s musings. Furthermore, in response to Adichie’s assertions that Ifemelu is being influenced to neutralize her “Africaness,” the review calls Adichie’s scenarios contrived and “alleged” of how one might feel in America. Overall, the review found Americanah clumsy, overbearing, and non-representative of one’s experience in America, with few redeeming qualities in whites or uncorrupted portrayals of Blacks. The review asserts that one can find entertainment in Americanah, but would be wrong to search for real-life representations from Adichie’s telling of Ifemelu’s American experience.
Rosecrans Baldwin, an American novelist and essayist, shared in this sentiment. Baldwin finds *Americanah* in need of a “tougher” editor. Baldwin calls Adichie’s narrative flat save for the internet blog and some experiences in Nigeria: “We get explanations in lieu of action; discourse, but little drama.” He claims that Adichie’s strength here was in the telling of new experience and the feeling of immigration, but that she failed to integrate properly the coming of age of Ifemelu and Obinze. Baldwin was disappointed, expecting more from Adichie following her work on *Purple Hibiscus* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*. In opposition to this, another review on *National Public Radio* finds Adichie’s writing in *Americanah* “smart and good” on so many subjects. The author, Jennifer Reese, claims *Americanah* is “luxurious [in its] heft and scope” and could be called a story of immigration, about “being Black in the twenty-first century”, or an “exuberant comedy of manner” on incidents based in class differences, and undeniably a sweet” love story”. Reese found *Americanah* captivating and original, especially with Adichie’s “ever better” skill at weaving stories within her stories.

Another review on *All Africa* news finds *Americanah* powerful and moving despite others’ assertions that one can become bored throughout. Michael Onsando, a Kenyan author, considers Adichie’s portrayal of Ifemelu “brilliant.” He writes that one “grows close to her. She makes you share in her anger, sorrow, and confusion.” Onsando finds that Adichie’s rich use of language illuminates Ifemelu’s inner conflict with “sharp clarity,” taking almost every moment to further this question about race, prejudice, and discrimination. In particular, Onsando sites Ifemelu's feelings and interaction with Obinze as an area where Adichie explores her inner turmoil:

Only after she hung up did she begin to feel the stain of a burgeoning shame spreading all over her, for thanking him, for crafting his words “You sound totally American” into a garland she hung around her own neck. Why was it a compliment, an accomplishment, to sound American? She had won... She had won, indeed, but her triumph was full of air (*Americanah* 215).
Onsando points out this section as evidence of her brilliant portrayal and credits her with trying to call attention and make her readers see. White also notes the political edge and success in Adichie’s writing:

Even in this moment it is clear that Chimamanda is asking a question we have all asked ourselves. She does not give an answer….This book is not about answers or solutions that will help eliminate the problem of race discrimination. It is the author standing over the body of a casualty calling attention to it, not because she knows first aid, but because she knows if she shouts loud enough someone will hear.

While critics disagree on reasons for the success of Adichie’s third novel, her popularity grows and her book attains increasing readership. AinehiEdord, a writer for Brittle Papers, An African Literary Experience noted that Americanah’s books ranked changed for 3,873 to 179 on Amazon’s best sellers list just weeks later with the help of The New York Times promotion and Beyonce’s featuring Adichie’s Ted Talk on her hit single “Flawless”. And despite many assertions that her book lacks the attention to detail and good editing of her others, many critiques as well as the general public find her writing as good as the last. For the purpose of assessing the validity of the argument that Adichie benefits from the change in times, the treatment of her work by less than satisfied critics is crucial. The critic that found her book damning, left with little redeeming qualities of one’s experience in America or its citizens, nevertheless found good things to say of her. Her style is still praised while her plot progression is faulted. The critic who found her writing boring still wrote that he looked forward to future writing from her. Neither critiqued her overall ability as a writer. Neither critiqued her as a person. One still found her book worth reading. And neither invoked logical fallacies to debase her as a writer or person to justify his disagreeing with her subject matter. Have critics become so polite that one does not say what one truly thinks, or do these critics truly believe what they write. Has it become inappropriate to attack an author, especially one as acclaimed as Adichie? Or is it inappropriate because she is a Black woman? Would a white man fall under more scrutiny? Is Adichie treated more delicately than her male counterpart? Could her race or
gender have helped her against harsh critiques? She definitely fares better than the Black women before her. In the past, Black women weren’t thought of as those deserving of more gentle or even equal treatment. The twenty first century public and media seem in favor of Adichie and what she has to write whichever combination of circumstances has granted her this acceptance.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s three novels thus far have raised questions concerning cultural issues and challenged what many consider normal societal behavior. These texts address issues of class, race, identity, social inequality, and sexism, giving particular attention to the Black communities of Nigeria and The United States. In particular, Adichie’s novels highlight the treatment of Black women as her characters experience it in her three works Purple Hibiscus, Half of a Yellow Sun, and Americanah. Purple Hibiscus follows the story maturation of Kambili, a Nigerian girl whose father is oppressive towards her, her brother, and mother using religion as a weapon against them. Half of a Yellow Sun documents the lives of several fictional characters preceding and during the Biafrain war. At the heart of the narrative are two Igbo sisters trying to find their place in society despite the cultural barriers deterring them. In Americanah, Ifemelu follows a path similar to Adichie’s in travelling to America for college. There she is met with race, class, and sex limitations that compound those she experienced back in Nigeria. In all her novels, Adichie confronts the issues of the Black community with her unyielding assertions. Her point of view makes an appeal to her reader, raising consciousness of these matters, and inspiring conversation and action.

Historically, in the United States, Black women have received negative criticism and oftentimes been alienated for writing such as hers. Black women writers have been charged with dividing the Black community and vilifying the Black man. Zora Neale Hurston was accused of plagiarism, fabrication of anthological findings, and most devastatingly child molestation once her contemporaries decided that she did not write of subjects in keeping with their idea of the “New Negro” and positive portrayals of Blacks. Michelle Wallace was alienated by the literary community and criticized even by fellow feminists for writing on the negative behavior of Black men. And Alice Walker was accused of falsely portraying the
Black community for the benefit of a White audience, and charged with seeking to separate the “solid” Black community.

In contrast, Adichie has received an overwhelming amount of positive criticism despite her similar subject matter to that of these women. All of her book-length works are well received and critically acclaimed. Following the release of the film adaption of *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Adichie was approached about a film adaption for *Americanah* as well. Unlike these women, Adichie is achieving success and positive reception in her lifetime while avoiding personal assaults on her character and personal life. The experiences of these women paved the way for Adichie’s experience with writing about the Black community. In previous times, undoubtedly Adichie would have struggled as Hurston, Wallace, and Walker did with finding respect and footing in the literary community.

Many twenty-first century reader welcome the topics discussed in Adichie’s writing and finds her perspective increasingly acceptable as evidenced by the overwhelmingly positive response following her book releases. The Black women before her granted her the open minded audience for which to write. Using the criteria outlined in Reception theory, one can draw possible conclusions for the reasons behind Adichie’s success. Reception theory predicts that society’s “norms” determine one’s critical reception. Adichie’s reception suggests that America as well as Nigeria has become more progressive in its acceptance of feminist ideology, and more sympathetic to the Black woman or perhaps just more tolerant. However, the Exploitation theory of sociology suggests that education and experience teaches those not necessarily tolerance and acceptance, but the ability to appear tolerant and accepting. Therefore, although it’s tempting to say that her accolades testify to a more open-minded contemporary culture, Adichie’s positive reception does not necessarily correlate with progress, but possibly that readers and critics have learned the politically correct response to such writing. One could question whether Adichie’s writing provokes the same internal response in Americans as the writing of previous Black women writers. Perhaps it is who she is that gives her novels success. In *Americanah*, through her character Shan, Adichie claims that “Ifemelu can write that blog…Because she’s African. She’s writing from the outside…She
can write it and get all these accolades and get invited to give talks. If she were African American, she’d just be labeled angry and shunned” (*Americanah* 418). Here Adichie suggests that she has the permission to write in a way that African American women still cannot for the American, Nigerian, or male reader. Despite this admission, Adichie’s overwhelming success goes beyond that of mere acceptance, proving that America has perhaps seen a genuine change in reception over time. Critics and the general public alike are not only generally respectful of the Black woman writer, but approving and appreciative of her unique voice and insight into Black culture.
Bibliography


Academic Vita
Nateshia Wanamaker
n.wanamaker@aol.com

Education
BA, English; Women’s Studies Minor
The Pennsylvania State University, Abington College
Schreyer Honors College

Schreyer Honors College
Thesis Title: CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE a study of her subject matter and reception
Thesis Supervisor: Karen Weekes Ph.D.

Grants, Awards, and Honors:
Abington Alumni Society Award
Beverly McHugh Wright Scholarship
Schreyer’s Honors Gateway Program Scholarship
Faculty Senate Scholarship (Abington College English Department)
Dean’s List minimum GPA 3.5 (2013- present)
Professional Memberships:

STD (Sigma Tau Delta) English Honor Society (vice president)

CVD (Civitas Victus Dictio) Honor Society (member)