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Twins: A Compelling Narrative Device in Two Igbo Novels

In West African Igbo culture, twins were historically considered evil, the wicked pair sent to their unfortunate mother as a curse. In most parts of Igboland, twins would be carried to the community's "evil forest" in clay pots and left to die. Considering Southern Nigeria's remarkably high twin birth rate, at twice the global average, twin killing was not a rare occurrence (Akinboro 41). The practice has since been abolished, but presents the important backdrop for the use of both literal and figurative twins in Igbo literature. In Chinua Achebe's first and best-known novel Things Fall Apart, twin killing is presented as the most tangible contrast between Christian and Igbo beliefs, between tradition and modernity. In the novel, twin killing is a featured practice given substantial weight, and is discussed by several central characters. Achebe, arguably Nigeria's most famous author, had considerable influence on later Nigerian writers, and since Achebe's time, twins have become an important theme and touchstone for Igbo literature. In later novels by Igbo writers, twins and doubles are frequently encountered, reflecting the local phenomenon of twins, harking back to ancient Igbo superstitions, and serving as Igbo-specific literary foils.

Two novels in particular are emphatic in their use of twins, achieving both literary elegance and anthropological authenticity. Buchi Emecheta's The Joys of Motherhood, and Chimamanda Adichie's Half of a Yellow Sun each employ twins and doubles as their prominent literary device. Both novels use the twins for such vast purposes as character

development, character and situational parallels, and to illustrate problems and possibilities associated with modern life in Nigeria.

Buchi Emecheta relies on twins in her feminist tragedy The Joys of Motherhood, presenting a figurative twin for the protagonist Nnu Ego, and a set of literal twins whose contrasting natures reveal distinctly different possibilities for young women in a changing Nigeria. The first set of twins in The Joys of Motherhood is Nnu Ego and her *chi*, or personal god. Nnu Ego's *chi* is the Slave Woman brutally beaten to death by Nnu Ego's brother, an elder son of Nnu Ego's father Agbadi. With her last breath, her eyes "glazed with approaching death", the Slave Woman vowed to return to Agbadi in the form of a "legitimate daughter" (Emecheta 23). Nnu Ego, a daughter born to Agbadi by his mistress months later, is born bearing a suspicious lump on her head; the local *dibia* (medicine man) and community are in agreement that the bump was the result of the "final blow" dealt to the Slave Woman (23, 27). The critical union between Nnu Ego and her figurative, ghostly twin is set up from Nnu Ego's earliest days and the Slave Woman's tragic fate decides Nnu Ego's. As Nnu Ego's *chi*, the Slave Woman is truly a part of her, residing within Nnu Ego as her guiding spirit. In the article "Gendered Hauntings", Stéphane Robolin underscores this very point, and emphasizes its importance throughout Emecheta's novel: "The Slave Woman figures not simply as the guiding spirit of Nnu Ego; she *is* Nnu Ego. The protagonist, in other words, becomes an avatar of this captive servant, so that one embodies the other" (Robolin 78). In the same section of "Gendered Hauntings", Robolin expands upon the inevitability of the connection between the Slave Woman and Nnu Ego, and asserts that Emecheta "conjoins the condition of slavehood and the condition of womanhood" (77). Thus, the figurative siblinghood, the metaphorical connection between Nnu Ego and the

Slave Woman is not only determined by the supernatural circumstances surrounding the Slave Woman's death. The two conditions, let alone the two individuals, are twins: slavehood and womanhood. In this way Emecheta brilliantly twists the twin theme of the novel to fit not just characters, but cultural truths and tragedies.

The metaphorical union between Nnu Ego and her Slave Woman *chi*, their shared entrapment, carries on even after their own earthly deaths. The Slave Woman's initial refusal to provide children to the desperate Nnu Ego directly parallels Nnu Ego's actions when, after her own death, she becomes an unyielding goddess of fertility. Undoubtedly, this is a harsh critique of the treatment of womanhood and motherhood in Igbo culture, just as the slavehood-womanhood connection Robolin's article elucidated. Just before the concluding paragraph of The Joys of Motherhood, the narrator, now firmly sympathetic toward Nnu Ego, tells the reader people felt "Nnu Ego was a wicked woman even in death because, however many people appealed to her to make women fertile, she never did" (Emecheta 224). Nnu Ego desperately wanted children and prayed to her Slave Woman *chi* to provide them, but years after her *chi* relented, giving her nine children, Nnu Ego had undergone a radical shift of perspective. Nnu Ego prays to God: "Yes, I have many children, but what do I have to feed them on? On my life...If I am lucky enough to die in peace, I even have to give them my soul" (Emecheta 186).

The Joys of Motherhood also provides literal, identical twins, Taiwo and Kehinde, though for a purpose distinct from the figurative pair in Nnu Ego and the Slave Woman. Through Nnu Ego's twin daughters Taiwo and Kehinde, the narrator explores the two possibilities of young womanhood in colonial Nigeria. While the two are physically and

genetically identical, the young twins' personalities are easily distinguishable, one providing a sharp, direct contrast to the other:

They were now fifteen. They looked very much like their mother, fair-skinned, and with the narrow face of Agbadi...They were identical in appearance, but not in character; the one called Kehinde, "the second to arrive", was much deeper than Taiwo, "she who tasted the world first".

(Emecheta 203)

The girls are described with the pronoun "they", accurately, until the discussion becomes one of character. The twins' sharp contrast of mind is further emphasized by Taiwo and Kehinde's identical physical appearance. While they both look like their mother, Taiwo's personality is the most reminiscent of Nnu Ego's. Taiwo's accepting, traditional attitude results in a betrothal to a young Ibo man whose ideal wife "could bear children, keep his room clean and wash his clothes...That Taiwo was beautiful and quiet he calculated as an added bonus" (Emecheta 203). Nnu Ego's traditional husband Nnaife would certainly agree with this practical approach to marriage, thus Taiwo follows in Nnu Ego's unfortunate footsteps. Kehinde, though "the second to arrive" was the groundbreaker of the family's women, refusing traditional arranged marriage and bride price, and most radically, selecting a Yoruba, not Igbo, mate (204). Nnaife's opinion of such an alliance, an Igbo woman with a Yoruba man, throws him into a fit of rage which ultimately affords him a new residence: a prison cell (218).

The pair is used to emphasize the contrast between the young women. Because they are identical twins, their differences are all the more striking and obvious. They represent the opposing pulls felt by a colonial Nigerian woman; it was a matter of choosing

traditional ways and gender roles or embracing modernization and an entirely different set of challenges and problems. Taiwo represents the traditional woman, docile and uneducated, whose sole purpose is to serve her husband in the household. Kehinde represents the modern Nigerian, turning her back on the traditional customs her twin is so eager to embrace for the sake of ease and familiarity. A woman can follow either path: Taiwo and Kehinde have identical genes, upbringings and social situations, but take different risks and make different choices. This same truth, that the individuality of literal twins reveals the most important parts of their nature, is also apparent in the set presented in the novel Half of a Yellow Sun, which the latter half of this essay will examine.

With both the figurative twins Nnu Ego and her Slave Woman *chi*, and the literal twins Taiwo and Kehinde, The Joys of Motherhood successfully uses the twins as uniquely Igbo character foils, revealing interesting similarities and differences within the pairs that helps to define each character, and, using parallels, anticipate their respective fates. The novel, through the sets of twins, delves into the greater problems facing Igbo society, most emphatically the issue of gender. Since twins are so extraordinarily common in Igbo regions of Nigeria, and given the mysterious and important history surrounding twins in the culture, they are a particularly suitable vehicle for exploring the intricacies of not just the novel's characters, but its overall themes. Each figurative or literal twin plays its own distinct role, and through the myriad of doubles the novel is able to touch upon a wide range of traits, situations, and a changing culture's challenges.

Twins in Half of a Yellow Sun, though represented differently and for a less didactic purpose, are equally essential to the plot and theme of the novel as the twins of The Joys of Motherhood. Olanna and Kainene's relationship is fundamental to the development of both

characters, especially their relationship as twin sisters. Half of a Yellow Sun, like The Joys of Motherhood, explores the supernatural element of twinhood, the internal connection and influence one can have over the other. While the novel abstains from the ghostly or haunted other like Nnu Ego's *chi*, there is a consistent theme of psychological desire to resemble one another. As a modern novel, Half of a Yellow Sun is able to accomplish the multi-faceted sense of doubling, twin lives and twin plots, with only one set of twins and five total characters. The key is that each character's psyche is shamelessly exposed, and every element of their lives revealed. Because of this, the intricate geometric connections between each character, event, feeling, relationship are believable. The reader has a complicated, layered sense of each character. The novel is as much about twins as Joys of Motherhood and about culture as the foundational novel Things Fall Apart, but departs from their style into one that is more inward, psychological, and always omniscient.

Centered around the Nigeria-Biafra war of the late 1960s, Half of a Yellow Sun's protagonist Olanna and her twin sister Kainene have a troubled relationship, their problems stemming from their fundamental character differences. Olanna, one of the three "perspective characters" of the novel, is troubled by her sister's lack of interest in their waning friendship, her aloofness. Olanna is introspective and emotional, while Kainene is proud and intellectual. The contrast is apparent in Olanna's habit of thanking the hired help and calling them by their first name; to Olanna it is a sign of progress, respect for their common humanity. She is uncomfortable with the class divisions in her own society. Kainene is unimpressed and impassive to the practice, responding with simple boredom to Olanna's suggestion that Kainene should do the same (Adichie 37). The literal twin sisters' opposition is a development of adulthood, however. Previously, the two were of the same

mind, twins in the figurative *and* literal sense, and Olanna mourns the loss of her childhood companion and confidant, longing for their younger days:

Olanna wished they still had those flashes, moments when she could tell what Kainene was thinking. When they were in primary school, they sometimes looked at each other and laughed, without speaking, because they were thinking the same joke. (Adichie 39)

At this point in the novel, the sisters are distant, with Olanna yearning for her sister's company, and Kainene feeling indifferent. Since childhood, the twins' relationship deteriorated, until in adulthood their differences match their insecurities. Olanna is insecure about her dependence, overly emotional personality and weakness: "[Olanna] wished there was somebody she could lean against; then she wished she was different, the sort of person who did not need to lean on others, like Kainene" (131). Kainene is self-conscious of her physical appearance and emotional distance, noting uncomfortably "my father gave [the house] to me as a bit of a dowry, I think, an enticement for the right sort of man to marry his unattractive daughter...Olanna said she didn't want a house. Not that she needs one. Save the houses for the ugly daughter" (86). Neither twin sees herself as superior to the other, but rather, inferior due to the impressive qualities their twin possesses and the other so badly lacks. Unlike Taiwo and Kehinde of The Joys of Motherhood, even these twins' names reflect their uniqueness, and are not based on just birth order. Kainene explains: "[Olanna's] name is the lyrical *God's Gold*, while mine is the more practical *Let's watch and see what next God will bring*" (Adichie 73).

Even the twins' romantic relationships in Half of a Yellow Sun mirror each other; Kainene and Richard's relationship can be seen as a foil plot for Olanna and Odenigbo. They

are reminiscent of the direct relationship parallels found in The Joys of Motherhood. In Half of a Yellow Sun, Richard depends on Kainene's love and acceptance in the same way Olanna relies on Odenigbo; early in their relationship, in Port Harcourt, Richard "realized that hers was a life that ran fully and would run fully even if he was not in it" (Adichie 97). Kainene's top priority is making her business profitable; relationships come second. It is not until the breakout of the attacks in Kano that Kainene first expresses any sort of love for him, through a brief non-committal note. While Kainene is often abrasive, her strength and independence as a woman is admirable and certainly preferable to her twin sister's more traditionally feminine weakness and dependence. Kainene and Richard's sex life, also, is a foil for Olanna and Odenigbo. Richard's awe of Kainene's commanding presence causes fear and persistent impotence; the two are completely sexually incompatible (Adichie 79, 80). Richard fears that Kainene's lack of sexual interest in him, due to his inability to satisfy, will ultimately cause the relationship's destruction (80).

On the topic of sexuality, Olanna and Odenigbo are the opposite of Kainene and Richard. Olanna and Odenigbo make love at defining times in their life, and the type of intercourse reflects the nature of the events leading up to it; it is a major theme and touchstone of the chapters which feature Olanna. With little exception, Olanna and Odenigbo are mutually satisfied with their sexual relationship. Both inside and outside the realm of sex, Olanna seems trapped with Odenigbo, and even her mini-epiphany about his nature and her potential (Adichie 284) is temporary. She continues to accept him, forgive him, and use his moral trepidation (impregnating a village girl) as an opportunity to explore other sexual options for herself, selfishly, with the goal of redeeming her self. She tells Odenigbo about the incident in order to force him to need her in the same way she

needed him previously, she is excited because, through her own infidelity, “his certainty had been rocked” (Adichie 307). In addition, Olanna clings to Odenigbo’s humility and shame, finding comfort in possessing the moral upper-hand:

[Olanna] kept her eyes straight ahead and glanced at him only once, at the tentative way he held the steering wheel. She felt morally superior to him. Perhaps it was unearned and false, to think she was better than he was, but it was the only way she could keep her disparate emotions together, now that his child with a stranger was born. (Adichie 310)

As such, Olanna’s brave act of adopting Baby is (at least partially) rooted in a desire to impress Odenigbo and her family, rooted in dependence and a need for acceptance and admiration. Kainene, with her sharp wit, immediately understood what motives were behind Olanna’s tremendous act of compassion, telling Olanna “You’re doing this to please your revolutionary lover...you’re always pleasing other people” (316). These sisters serve as literary foils for each other,; it is a major theme of the novel and the main device through which it describes and build the characters. They are not understood through long, depictive paragraphs about their respective personalities. No such clear-cut synopsis exists in the novel. It is through their actions and mostly, their interactions, that the reader gets a sense of the characters.

The two relationships, with all their own sets of problems, collide when Olanna and Richard have a one-night stand, largely due to Olanna’s persistence. The act, which eventually reaches Kainene’s ears, is the final nail in the sisters’ frail relationship’s coffin. Kainene’s honest, biting reaction reveals truths about Olanna’s nature, and her own, when Kainene says over the phone, “You’re the good one and the favorite and the beauty and the

Africanist revolutionary who doesn't like white men, and you simply did not need to fuck him" (Adichie 319). The narrator picks up after Kainene's rant: "Olanna put down the phone and felt a sharp cracking inside her. She knew her twin well, knew how tightly Kainene held on to hurt" (319).

The twins' reunion near the end of the war, after years of strife and nothing more than that contact which was necessary, results in a fundamental change of character in each individual. Both sisters, by this point, are suffering the realities of war: loss, dislocation, hunger and fear. By necessity, Olanna, Odenigbo and Baby flee to Kainene for refuge, her remote country home one of few still standing. Soon after contact is resumed, under extraordinary circumstances no less, Kainene softens her attitude toward Olanna, most noticeable when she embraces Olanna and calls her by the long-abandoned Igbo pet name *Ejima m*, "my twin". Olanna, stunned, "wanted to hold her sister for much longer, to smell that familiar scent of home" (Adichie 434). After briefly touching upon some of the more horrific sights the two women have seen throughout the war, Kainene says "some things are so unforgivable that they make other things forgivable" (435). At that point, the twins begin to repair their relationship, talking frankly about their own lives and childhoods. Kainene, stronger of the two, has the most influence and changes Olanna more than Olanna changes her. She says of Olanna's relationship with Odenigbo, "There's something very lazy about the way you have loved him blindly for so long without ever criticizing him. You've never accepted that the man is ugly" (486). The day following Kainene's sharp critique of Olanna's weakness, Kainene begins to open her eyes to the sheltered upbringing the twins shared, and encourages her to let Baby "see life as it is" (487). To that end, and much to Olanna's dismay, "Kainene let Baby hold the dagger of the

emaciated man who paraded the compound, muttering ‘*Nqwa*, let the vandals come, let them come now.’ Kainene let Baby eat a lizard leg” (487). Olanna, through her twin’s insight, and with her twin’s support, becomes a stronger character than Odenigbo, and their relationship’s balance of power shifts dramatically. Olanna’s spirit and sense of independence thrives in Kainene’s presence, and Kainene softens in Olanna’s presence, and coming full-circle from the novel’s beginning when Kainene refused to even thank her servants, she mourns the loss of one who was decapitated by Nigerian enemy fire. Kainene, introspective, admits she “‘never really noticed Ikejide,’ and Olanna placed an arm on her sister’s shoulder and said nothing” (489). Thus, their relationship is a saving grace for them both; their relationship as twins, connected, saves them.

In the end, Half of a Yellow Sun also delves into the spiritual side of twins, like The Joys of Motherhood, but with comforting rather than tragic undertones. Kainene’s disappearance at the very end of the conflict, when she heads out to trade across enemy lines, has a profound impact on Olanna. “It was greater than grief. It was stranger than grief. She did not know where her sister was. She did not know” (Adichie 538). Olanna, shown in the novel as a practicing Christian, falls back on the ancient Igbo belief system, seeking the help of the *dibias* and only finding peace in the Igbo notion of an afterlife: “Our people say we reincarnate, don’t they...when I return in my next life, Kainene will be my sister” (541).

In these two novels figurative and literal twins play a myriad of roles: they remind the reader of a previous event or person, contrast two characters, liken two different characters, and foreshadow the events of another character. The Joys of Motherhood achieves this through several pairs of characters, while Half of the Yellow Sun explores the

theme to the same degree, but with only one set of twin women. Every aspect of Olanna and Kainene's personalities is exposed through the Half of a Yellow Sun's omniscient narrator, and as a modern novel, it is concerned with the depth, rather than the breadth of its more personal, psychological themes. The Joys of Motherhood is not only about Nnu Ego and her specific plight, but of the plight of all Igbo women, of the poor, and of the colonized. Half of a Yellow Sun, despite its precise historical context, is a novel solely about its characters, their struggles, their relationships. In The Joys of Motherhood, each set of twins fulfills a neat role and examines a niche of Igbo culture, pitting tradition against modernity, and sharply critiquing gender roles and rites. Even with each novel's greater themes, narration styles and different-sized character casts, both works achieve their goals with twins. Twins are *critically important* to The Joys of Motherhood and Half of a Yellow Sun, yielding the complex pictures, parallels and oppositions that, in each work, develop central characters and explore the intricacies of pivotal relationships.

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