

The Engagement of Contemporary Texts with Political Issues of the Present Day.

Contemporary texts are informed by the context in which they are written. This can be inadvertent or purposeful, but all texts borrow from the present day in order to create a meaningful representation to the reader. Even texts which appear to wholly reject the present, be that fantasy or sci-fi or historical novels, cannot be removed from the time and place in which they are written. This is because “a wholly fictitious story cannot be imagined, for no one could understand it” (Lowenthal, p. 373). In order for a text to be understood by its readers, it has to have some basis in reality so that the reader has the knowledge required to decode the meaning. For some texts, the choice to engage with issues of the present day is at the forefront. Some authors want their readers to examine current issues when they read, and actively use their texts to explore complex and important issues faced in the present day. Oftentimes, the political climate is examined through these contemporary texts. Sometimes this an overt examination of current politics, whereas other times it is about drawing parallels or using hindsight in order to highlight how past political decisions impact on the present day. In this way, contemporary fiction can draw on the past, present, future or parallel universes, and still present a relevant engagement with current political issues.

Half of a Yellow Sun, written by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and first published in 2006, is one such text. An historical fiction novel by topic, focusing on the Biafran War in Nigeria, it examines the political climate of the conflict whilst also engaging with its aftermath and the politics of the time it was written. Writing this novel years after the conflict had ended means that Adichie infuses the conflict with knowledge of what comes after; hindsight allowing her to discuss events critically, providing an informed lens in which to examine the past and how it has impacted the present. As the reader examines the events of the book through this critical lens, looking back on a period of immense change for Nigeria, they are able to draw parallels with the world as they know it now. It can be argued that “the past... becomes a

treasure trove to be mined for pertinent connections and similarities to our postmodern world” (Shiller, p. 539) meaning that contemporary historical fiction can be a great way of understanding how to navigate the present by reviewing the past. Odenigbo explains this concept best when he states “The real tragedy of the postcolonial world is not that the majority of people had no say in whether or not they wanted this new world; rather, it is that the majority have not been given the tools to *negotiate* this new world.” (p. 101, emphasis in original). Odenigbo is a tribalist and against the changes that have happened in Nigeria before the war however this statement shows his intelligence and ability to separate himself from the situation. Open discussion, particularly reading and writing, like this is what provides the tools to negotiate the new world. This is seen through Ugwu and how he develops throughout the novel. Despite Odenigbo’s astute observation as to the state of affairs, over the course of the novel Odenigbo becomes lost to alcoholism and depression, revealing himself to also not possess the correct tools for navigation of the new world. On the other hand, “Ugwu is able to cope with and deal the horrors of his experiences in the war better than his master, because whereas Odenigbo becomes more disillusioned and withdrawn, Ugwu finds his voice through writing and talking” (Dickson, p. 84). Ugwu starts the novel as a poor servant of Odenigbo’s however after prolonged exposure to the academic debates happening within the house as well as formal education, Ugwu develops into a thinker and a writer. He is able to process his role in the war through the metatext ‘The World Was Silent When We Died’, a sophisticated and mature novel he is shown to be writing. The fact these chapters are written in the present tense suggests that this process of healing is still ongoing. Through this, Adichie is normalising this period of healing as well as showing the way literature can connect past and present, as she is attempting to do with *Half of a Yellow Sun*.

Hilary Mantel also acts as “a medium, because she channels communication between the Tudor world and today” (Arias, p. 19) in her 2009 novel, *Wolf Hall*. Despite the distance in

time, *Wolf Hall* highlights how similar the present political climate is to that of the Tudor court. The life of Henry VIII is often revisited time and again, frequently presented as both scandalous and glamorous and therefore an excellent source of entertainment. However, it was also one of the major turning points in British political history and where we begin to be able to see our own world beginning. Cromwell navigates his way through many political dilemmas during the course of *Wolf Hall*, many of which are still unsolved today. Arguably, “The problems of Tudor Britain - social mobility, religious freedom, the ongoing tussle between individual, church and state - have not been resolved with the passing of the years” (Laing), meaning that Mantel’s examination of the machinations behind the creation of our current world are as relevant today as they were in Tudor times. Cromwell expostulates on the failings of the world he finds himself in, speaking of issues very familiar to a 21st century reader:

The spectacles of pain and disgrace I see around me, the ignorance, the unthinking vice, the poverty and the lack of hope, and oh, the rain—the rain that falls on England and rots the grain, puts out the light in the man’s eye and the light of learning too, for who can reason if Oxford is a giant puddle and Cambridge is washing away downstream, and who will enforce the laws if the judges are swimming for their lives? (p. 635)

Whilst most of the issues are overtly spoken of, Cromwell is careful to hide his opinion of corruption from the church and state. The rain becomes representative of the corruption that trickles down from the heads of state, both the King and his council as well as the heads of the church. Both these have elevated Cromwell from the blacksmith’s beaten boy into the respected, and feared, man he is at this point in the novel, meaning he is cautious about revealing his true feelings regarding these institutions. But Oxford and Cambridge were often caught up in politics and were seen as corrupt institutions by the common people, a view which has not changed too drastically since then. Similarly, judges were often seen as corrupt and

easily swayed to agree with whomever was paying them the most. This solidifies the idea that the rain is a metaphor for corruption, and one that can be carried forward to this day – where those in charge are drowning the country, with very little remorse. Contemporary historical fiction can be seen as playing “a key role in establishing a series of connections between past and present” (Mitchell, p. 37) and *Wolf Hall* is keen to show the political landscape Cromwell is traversing, is not one far removed from modern man’s.

Half a Yellow Sun uses multiple perspectives in order to help the reader glean understanding from the text. The three narrators are widely different and react in different ways to the war, but they all share an equal part in the narration, highlighting that all their processes are valid. The novel offers the perspectives of Richard, a white Englishman hoping to be accepted as a Biafran, and Olanna, a highly educated Nigerian woman, as well as Ugwu, the houseboy. These are not perspectives often associated with Nigerian politics, yet each offer profound insights into the politics of past and present. Often these are personal moments of clarity rather than overt political statements. Richard struggles with the realities of the Biafran war and states “‘I’m going on. Life is the same,’ he told Kainene. ‘I should be reacting; things should be different.’” (p. 167). The emphasis that “he told Kainene” shows how invested he is with the Biafran struggles but also how ideological he is, as Kainene, a native Nigerian, has a much more subdued reaction than Richard. His ideological nature is also highlighted by the repetition of “should”, showing he was expecting something different rather than simply hoping for it. Richard, an expatriate fascinated with Igbo culture, provides a narrative that “subverts conventional notions of Nigerian nationalism” (Akpome, p. 23) as he makes the conscious decision to identify as Biafran regardless of the stigma associated with this choice. Richard acknowledges he will never be considered Biafran, yet still chooses to fight alongside them. Adichie provides a voice to the underrepresented and transcends considerations of race, gender and class in order to present a wider perspective for her readers. This is particularly

relevant to the present political state as racism and gender and class inequalities are still rife, particularly in Nigeria where “if the ongoing turbulence in the Niger Delta is indicative of anything... Nigeria has still not learnt from her past mistakes on how to accommodate and make her disparate ethnic nationalities coexist” (Ojinmah, p. 2). *Half of a Yellow Sun* was published during a period of political unrest in Nigeria and the inclusive nature of Adichie’s novel can be seen as an entreaty to establish a better way of dealing with difference in Nigeria.

Similarly, Mantel centres her “narrative on the humane and free-thinking Thomas Cromwell, who believes in kindness, tolerance and education” (Laing) as an attempt to teach the reader of a better way. Contemporary historical fiction can be criticised for reducing “history to a collection of glossy images sundered from their real-life roots... [depriving] the past of its capacity to transform our collective future” (Shiller, p. 539). Whilst this may be true for some historical novels, Mantel’s use of third person narration, with a focus on Cromwell, seeks to combat this. Cromwell as a character can “draft a contract, train a falcon, draw a map, stop a street fight, furnish a house and fix a jury” (p. 31) – he is seedy and dangerous, but also intelligent and experienced. Cromwell is not someone to be messed with. He is a man who survived a lot; child abuse, war, the loss of his wife and family, among other things. All of this is presented to the reader in detail due to the third person narration. Mantel is sure not to gloss over any harrowing detail of Cromwell’s life, which the use of first person narration would be more likely to do. This makes him more appealing to the reader as they experience all his hardships with him. From the very first line of the novel, ““So now get up.”” (p. 3), Cromwell is searching for a way to move upwards, and forwards. This sets the tone for the rest of the novel and the fact the first line in the book is speech may suggest it is an attempt to speak directly to the reader; to take the morals and lessons learnt through the book and apply them to their own lives, to get up and work for what they believe in. Teenaged Cromwell ponders, rather profoundly, that “It gives him to think, how bad people are at loading carts. Men trying

to walk straight ahead through a narrow gateway with a wide wooden chest. A simple rotation of the object solves a great many problems.” (p. 13). Cromwell often provides simple answers, due to his simple beginnings, that men of higher status wouldn’t even consider. And the third person presentation of these means they are supposed to be considered, as his thoughts are deemed relevant enough to be narrated. It makes his views as an adult seem more relevant too, and the added bonus of hindsight, means that the modern ideas he outlandishly proposes in Tudor times are taken much more seriously by the reader. Mantel appears to use Cromwell as a mouthpiece from the past to the present, his likability and modern ideas strengthening his voice.

Ultimately *Half a Yellow Sun* is a novel of people for people, not a novel of politics. This was an important distinction Adichie made, stating in an article “I was also determined to make my novel about what I like to think of as the grittiness of being human – a book about relationships, about people who have sex and eat food and laugh” (Adichie, p. 50) rather than being a novel solely about the war and the devastation it caused. Despite the topic of the novel, this choice can be seen as a rejection of the current political view held towards people from Nigeria as reductionist. African authors were advised that publishers would only want to publish books “that confirms what we already seem to know about Africa... as long as we were writing about war, poverty, immigration, and exile, the work would be acceptable to the industry. But if we decided to write a simple love story... it would very likely not find a publishing house” (Mengiste, p. 941). Adichie rejected this as “To insist that there is one thing that is authentically African is to diminish the African experience.” (Adichie, p. 48); there is more to life in Africa than war and hardships. Odenigbo speaks of constructed identity when he says “I am Nigerian because a white man created Nigeria and gave me that identity. I am black because the white man constructed black to be as different as possible from his white. But I was Igbo before the white man came.” (p. 20). Odenigbo uses the anaphoric “I am” to

accept his labels of “Nigerian” and “black” but separates his Igbo identity with the coordinating conjunction “But”, creating a forceful effect for his final statement. This is the statement which is the most important to him, yet he still accepts the other identities given to him by “the white man”. In a similar way, Adichie wants to present an authentic account of being Nigerian whilst still, in some ways, acceding to the constraints she has been given. She chose to write a book that examines the humanity of war, not just the brutality despite that being the accepted political vision of a Nigerian experience.

Contemporary texts engage with political issues of the present day in multiple ways. Often providing readers with new ways to examine the present, contemporary fiction teaches readers that there are lots of different ways to view and respond to political issues. Contemporary historical fiction, in particular, can also be seen “as a means to honour the past, to understand its reverberation in the present, and to find a way to move forward.” (Mitchell, p. 28). It is about looking for connections and realising no problem is felt in isolation.

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