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## **John Cabot University**

Department of English Language and Literature

Bachelor of Arts in English Literature  
Minor in Classical Studies

Ekphrasis in the Postcolonial Novel:  
*Midnight's Children* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*

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## Abstract

This thesis investigates the presence and role of ekphrastic writing in postcolonial novels. In this thesis I propose to investigate John Everett Millais' *The Boyhood of Raleigh* in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and the Igbo pots in Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, in order to explore how figurative art, in the context of these novels, both broadens the postcolonial discourse and serves as a medium of interaction between the colonizer and the colonized. I intend to look closely at Millais' painting, which has come to represent the British expanding and colonizing influence, in the context of a novel, *Midnight's Children*, centered on post-independence India, and at Richard's, a white British man, obsession with the archaeological testimony of the Igbo autochthonous, pre-colonization, culture and art, as narrated in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. I intend to explore how the colonized relates to the art of the colonizer, as in Rushdie's novel, and how the art of the colonized is observed and appropriated by the colonizer, as in Adichie's. I propose to analyze both these cases of representation of visual forms of art as exemplifying instances of how figurative art can be explored, in postcolonial literature, as a means of cultural interaction between the colonized and the colonizer.

## **Dedication**

a nonno Lidio,

chi io sono e sarò è grazie a chi tu sei stato.

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# 1. Introduction on Ekphrasis

In this chapter, I will explore the literary device of ekphrasis, giving a brief historical overview of its employment starting from classical literature to its current and novel use in modern prose. I will then shortly discuss the ideological issues intrinsic to ekphrastic writing, since in the literary description of a visual artwork is the ontological process of creation and reinterpretation of said artwork. Finally, I will explore how the presence of ekphrastic passages relates and contributes to build the literary work in which they are contained.

## Definition and Historical Overview

The first traceable definition of ekphrasis is provided by Alios Theon, a Hellenistic scholar of Alexandria of Egypt. Alios Theon describes ekphrasis as follows: “*ekphrasis esti logos periegematikos, enargos hup’ upsin agon to deloumenon*,” literally translated by Heffernan as “ekphrasis is exhibitionistic (literally ‘leading around’) speech, vividly leading the subject before the eyes” (36). This very early definition shows how ekphrastic writing is concerned with establishing a contact between the artwork and its beholder, as filtered and mediated by its presentation in literary form. The term ekphrasis derives from the Greek words *ek*, meaning “out,” and *phrazein*, meaning “tell, declare” (Heffernan 36). The very etymology of this term therefore conveys the idea of giving voice to the work of art, of enabling it to literally speak as it reaches towards the reader.

As Karastathi notes, in the pre-sophistic classical tradition, “ekphrases were extended descriptions of peoples, landscapes, battles, places and objects,” they were largely considered “rhetorical exercises” aimed at “training the rhetorician in bringing a subject before the audience’s eyes” (93). The traditional link between ekphrasis and poetry, which has largely shaped the Western understanding of this rhetorical device, can be traced to Horace’s axiom “*ut pictura poesis*,” translatable as “as painting so poetry” (Eidt 10). The use of ekphrasis as a poetic device is therefore steeped into its early, classical usage. An example of how ekphrasis was both employed by the poet and received by its audience can be found in Homer’s description of the shield of Achilles in the eighteenth book of the *Iliad*. In this earliest example of ekphrastic composition, as the Homeric poems were performed rather than read, is evident how ekphrasis “functions as a device to make the listeners re-create the shields in their minds’ eyes” (Eidt 11). It is evident, therefore, how ekphrastic writing is concerned not only with the representation of the visual artwork but also with the reader’s or listener’s re-creation, and thus re-interpretation, of it. Such definition of ekphrastic writing, its being concerned primarily and prominently with poetry rather than prose, is reinforced by the description that Simonides of Ceos, as cited by Plutarch, gives of this rhetorical tool. According to the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE lyric poet, “painting is mute poetry and poetry is a speaking picture” (Eidt 10). Classical literature and philosophy quite often reflected on the existing ties between poetry and pictures, as they both are either visual or literary representation of the subject perceived by either the artist or the writer. An example of how the relationship between the visual and the literary was synthesized can be found in Plato’s *Republic*. As Eidt summarizes, Plato and his followers have strongly emphasized “the ‘inferiority’ of words to images with regard to their mimetic faithfulness of representation” (11). The relationship between image and poetic writing shifted in hierarchical favor of poetry during

Medieval times. Painting and visual arts were thoroughly devalued by Catholic doctrine, which classified them as too mechanical and manual disciplines to lead to spiritual and intellectual growth (Eidt 11-12). Such hierarchical relation between poetry and visual art was returned to its original, Classical, egalitarian terms through the scholarly attention of, amongst others, Leon Battista Alberti and Leonardo Da Vinci (Eidt 12). The revaluation of visual forms of art was followed by a renewed interest in describing them in literary texts. Such literary representations were, in any case, still most common and most celebrated in poetic works amongst whom, notably, John Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and W. H. Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts."

Albeit predominantly to be found in poetic texts, it is worth noticing, for the sake of this analysis, how ekphrastic writing has figured in prose literature. The prosaic ekphrastic Hellenistic and Byzantine tradition is awarded little scholarly attention. According to Karastathi, such lack of attention to ekphrasis in the classical prose text should be ascribed to its being perceived, when compared to classical poetry, as derivative (97).

As Karastathi notes, "the association of ekphrasis with poetry" and therefore its "theorization for some time as a poetic genre, has somewhat disregarded its presence and function in storytelling" (94). It is, therefore, worth analyzing the presence of ekphrastic descriptions in modern prose works, in light of their "function in storytelling," function which will be relevant in my investigation of the significance of ekphrasis in *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Midnight's Children*.

### **Ekphrastic Writing in Modern Prose**

In analyzing the presence and significance of ekphrasis in prose fiction, it must first be explored how the notion of a temporal narrative can be contained in the description of an

artwork. In order to explore the narrativity of ekphrasis, I shall return to Homer's description of the shield of Achilles. As Karastathi notes, "Homer's language animates the various parts of the shield of Achilles at exactly the time they are being forged by Hephaestus. He thus introduces a justifiable order that follows the process of production, adding a temporal and narrative dimension within the descriptive act" (94). It is thus evident how ekphrasis can not only be identified as a descriptive act, but as a means of narrative storytelling. As Heffernan notices, ekphrasis "generates a narrative from a work of art," as "ekphrastic fiction turns the work of art—whether still or moving—into a story that mirrors the mind of a character" (48). In light of these considerations, ekphrasis can no longer be strictly defined, as Plato's school did, as a mimetic means of representation, but rather as a tool of fictional storytelling. It is in this nuanced theoretical context that the study of ekphrasis in the novel is located. Hence, Karastathi calls for a redefinition of the term ekphrasis, as she quotes Clüver's observation that "contemporary ekphrastic practices have subverted the traditional relation of the representational visual text to its verbal representation" (94). Ekphrasis is therefore recognized as a meaningful tool to be used in prose-writing and in the shaping of both a character and a story. According to Louvel (qtd. in Karastathi) ekphrasis in prose fiction constitutes "a different kind of ekphrasis altogether," in which it is emphasized its "dynamic quality" (95). Karastathi therefore notices how this "dynamic quality of ekphrasis,' (...) resists viewing it as a frozen and inert moment in a text; instead the ekphrastic moment, because it enacts a re-representation, is 'a place of aesthetic over-saturation'" (95).

The broadening of the traditional definition of ekphrasis does not only concern its function in fictional storytelling, but also the kinds of object whose description can be defined as ekphrastic writing. As demonstrated by the historical overview of its use, ekphrastic descriptions

have been mostly concerned with paintings, and, less often, with sculptures and architecture, as these were considered too mechanical and manual. However, as Eidt emphasizes, the redefinition of ekphrasis is aimed at including “as object of ekphrasis any discourse composed in a non-verbal sign system” (16). Such broadened definition will be emphasized in its novelty in our analysis of the ekphrastic descriptions of Igbo pots in Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun*.

Therefore, as Karastathi notes, “far from being a mere ornament, ekphrasis, as a descriptive device, enriches narrative fiction by inviting an already extant image, which has its own historical and theoretical associations, into the fictional discourse” (95). Thus, part of the way in which ekphrastic writing in modern novels can shape and inform the process of narrative storytelling is by playing with or subverting the artwork’s historical and cultural associations, as in Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*. Something which must also be carefully considered, before analyzing from a postcolonial perspective the ekphrastic descriptions contained in both Adichie’s and Rushdie’s novels, is the ideological implications and power struggles between the visual and the literary intrinsic in the process of “re-making” of an artwork in written form.

### **Ekphrasis, Ideology, and Power Dynamics**

One last implication of the use of ekphrasis in a work of fiction which must be addressed, before analyzing its presence in Adichie’s and Rushdie’s novels, which will be pertinent to this thesis, is represented by the ideological and dialectical tension intrinsic in the literary description and re-elaboration of the visual “other,” namely figurative art. According to Grant F. Scott (qtd. in Eidt) ekphrastic writing can be discussed as the “appropriation of the ‘visual other’ and as an attempt to ‘transform and master the image by inscribing it’” (14). According to Scott, therefore, ekphrastic writing is not merely a mimetic and rhetorical exercise, but rather a means of

acquiring, and conveying, cultural dominance. Such considerations are particularly relevant when applied to Richard's fascination with the Igbo pots in *Half of a Yellow Sun* and Saleem's fascination with the Millais' painting in *Midnight's Children*. This dialectic of dominance therefore separates the viewer from the viewed, the represented from the absent. In such a process, Mitchell argues (qtd. in Eidt), "the self is understood to be an active, speaking, seeing subject, while the 'other' is projected as passive, seen (...). Like the masses, the colonized, the powerless and voiceless everywhere, visual representation cannot represent itself" (15).

Thus, intrinsic in the process of ekphrastic description is the process of assimilation and re-elaboration of the visual "other". As mentioned above, this process of re-making is particularly relevant when present in works of fiction, as the representation of the figurative work of art is mediated by the character observing it, therefore offering insight into their character and narrative. As Heffernan notices, "the verbal version of a work of visual art remakes the original" (48). Such process of remaking cannot be separated from the narrative context in which it is contained, as it acquires a new meaning and simultaneously shapes the narrative and fictional discourse in which it is presented.

## 2. Postcolonial Theory and Ekphrasis

In this chapter, I will firstly explore the existing link between postcolonial theory and ekphrastic writing, and the relevance of noticing and analyzing ekphrastic passages in performing a postcolonial reading of novels such as Adichie's and Rushdie's. Then, I will proceed to investigate and present the postcolonial theoretical perspective which I will employ in my analysis of ekphrasis in the postcolonial novel. I will start by considering Spivak's discussion about colonial epistemic violence, and seek to tie her seminal question, "can the subaltern speak?" not only to the linguistic issues raised by both Adichie's and Rushdie's anglophone novels, but also to my considerations regarding the described artworks as an instance of cultural expression, either produced or assimilated. I will then proceed to consider Thiong'o's observations regarding cultural, linguistic and artistic, hegemony, as exercised by the colonizer on the colonized. To this end I will be expanding on Spivak's question and exploring what circumstances postcolonial theory presents as necessary for the subaltern to speak both linguistically and artistically. I will lastly consider Ashcroft's theoretical perspective regarding notions of cultural hegemony, imperial cultural oppression, appropriation of the colonized's language and art by the colonizer, as presented in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, and assimilation by the colonized of the colonizer's cultural means of expression, as explored in *Midnight's Children*.

## Ekphrasis, Postcolonialism, and Prosopopoeia

As explored in the previous chapter, ekphrastic writing lends itself particularly suitably to a postcolonial reading. Indeed, in the act of literary description of a figurative form of art is the intrinsic practice of appropriation and remediation of the cultural “other”. According to Brock, then, “postcolonial discourse theory is paradigmatically *ekphrastic*” (133). The visual “other” is represented in the literary text as filtered by the character’s description of it, a character who exercises cultural dominance over it, as Richard does, or strives to assimilate it, as in Saleem’s experience. Explored in these terms, ekphrasis is an interesting site of exploration to perform a postcolonial analysis of the literary work in which it is contained. As Richard Brock claims, “*ekphrasis*, the term that refers to narrative depictions of visual art, is traditionally reserved more or less exclusively for studies of the aesthetic affinities between visual art and literature, but it is uniquely positioned to articulate the critical movements effected by postcolonial discourse theory” (133). What must be analyzed, however, is not merely the literary description of the artwork presented in the narrative, but also the subject matter of the artwork itself. As mentioned beforehand, the subject matter of the ekphrastic description fits, with its historical and cultural connotations, into the narrative discourse, interacting with its characters and shaping its course.

In this regard must therefore be mentioned Barthes’ observation regarding the “pregnant moments” depicted in figurative art. Barthes observes,

in order to tell a story, the painter has only an instant at his disposal, the instant he is going to immortalize on canvas, and he must choose it well, assuring it in advance of the greatest possible yield of meaning and pleasure. Necessarily total, this instant will be artificial..., a hieroglyph in which can be read at a single glance... *the present, the*

*past and the future; that is, the historical meaning of the represented action.* (qtd. in Brock 134, emphasis added)

Barthes' reflection on the carefully selected moment to immortalize in the act of artistic creation can be transposed to the artwork chosen to be re-created, and therefore re-mediated, in the act of its ekphrastic description. The artworks presented, and the way in which they are presented, in both *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Midnight's Children*, are effectively steeped in historical and colonial implications, which must not be overlooked in the postcolonial analysis of their ekphrastic description. To be considered is not only the historical connotation of the artwork presented, but also the moment in the narrative in which the ekphrastic description occurs, as will be later analyzed. Both Richard, in Adichie's novel, and Saleem, in Rushdie's, immediately respond to the artworks which they behold and with which they interact, both of them being familiar with historical weight of the figurative art they are describing. In this regard it is worth mentioning Bhabha's observation regarding postcolonial realities emerging within a Eurocentric perception of history, as the artworks emerge and disrupt the historically Eurocentric narrative in these novels. Bhabha argues that,

what must be mapped as a new international space of discontinuous historical realities is, in fact, the problem of satisfying the interstitial passages and process of cultural difference that are inscribed in the "in-between," in the temporal break-up that weaves the "global" text. (...) And, paradoxically, it is only through a structure of splitting and displacement—"the fragmented and schizophrenic decentering of the self"—that the architecture of the new historical subject emerges at the limits of representation itself. (qtd. in Brock 105)

An instance of what Bhabha describes as “fragmented and schizophrenic decentering of the self” which builds the historical subject, can be observed in the dynamic of gazes presented in *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Midnight’s Children*. Indeed, while Richard, endowed with the gaze of the colonizer, strives to identify himself with the culture represented by the Igbo pots, so Saleem, with the gaze of the colonized, struggles to identify himself with the youth painted by Millais in his *The Boyhood of Raleigh*.

A last consideration to be analyzed in exploring the link between ekphrasis and postcolonialism is represented by the Greek practice of prosopopoeia, as highlighted by Richard Brock. Citing Heffernan, Brock observes that, “‘ekphrastic tradition’ also encompasses ‘prosopopoeia, or the rhetorical technique of *envoicing a silent object*,’ it become clear that ekphrasis functions as nothing less than a comprehensive shorthand for the aims and operations of postcolonial discourse theory” (134, emphasis added). This connotation of the ekphrastic practice is essential in analyzing its employment in both Adichie’s and Rushdie’s novels. In both cases, the artwork is not merely described but, invested with its historical implications, given a voice with which both Richard and Saleem can interact. The artworks become thus invested with, and exemplifying of, a cultural voice, be it that of pre-colonization, autochthonous Igbo tradition or British colonial imperialism and expansion. In this regard, Brock claims how these “articulations positioned at the *margins* of a spatialized Eurocentric history” function “to narrativize, and ‘envoice,’ the silenced, the *marginal* discourse buried within this history” (134). The “marginal discourse” identified by Brock becomes evident in the ekphrastic descriptions of figurative artworks in both *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Midnight’s Children*, albeit in opposite ways. In Adichie’s novel, it is through Richard’s description of them, because of his willingness to identify with the culture they represent, that the Igbo pots, in their historical and colonial

implications are demarginalized. Differently, it is because of Saleem's willingness and inability to identify with and relate to the youth depicted by Millais that, by opposition, his own autochthonous history is demarginalized. In either case, it through the ekphrastic practice that the artworks—and the culture they either represent or define by contrast—are envoiced and allowed to speak.

### **Can the Subaltern Speak?**

Having tied the ekphrastic practice to the notion of prosopopoeia, or the envoicing of a silent object, I shall now return to Spivak's seminal question "can the subaltern speak?". If the ekphrastic description, enhanced in its meaning by its link to prosopopoeia, can enable something which was previously silent to speak, can the ekphrastic description of cultural artifacts, as in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, allow the silenced culture to speak? In this case it must be considered, however, that it is Richard's appreciation/appropriation, at least until the last pages of the novel, of the Igbo pots which is instrumental in presenting them to the reader. Similarly, can the envoiced *The Boyhood of Raleigh*, as it is perceived and described by the protagonist in *Midnight's Children* be instrumental in, by opposition, allow Saleem to speak?

Before analyzing how Spivak's observations are helpful in conducting the analysis proposed in this thesis, the extent to which the colonized culture has been silenced must be explored. Spivak argues that the clearest example "of epistemic violence" is represented by the "heterogenous project to constitute the colonial subject as the Other" (24-25). The silencing of the "other" culture is therefore presented as programmatic and instrumental to the dominant, colonizing, culture. Foucault observes how "a whole set of knowledges" have been "disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naïve knowledges, located low down on

the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity” (qtd. in Spivak 25). What must be noticed, through Foucault’s observation, is that the process of silencing of a culture does not result from that culture’s inability to speak itself, rather from the hierarchically imposed impossibility of self-expression. These considerations lead Spivak to formulate her question, the oppressed, if given the chance (the problem of representation cannot be bypassed here), and on the way to solidarity through alliance politics (a Marxist thematic is at work here) *can speak and know their conditions*. We must now confront the following question: On the other side of the international division of labor from socialized capital, inside *and* outside the circuit of epistemic violence of imperialist law and education supplementing an earlier economic text, *can the subaltern speak?... (25)*

A set of external circumstances is therefore listed by Spivak as necessary for the marginalized culture and for the subaltern to be able to speak and be heard. Nevertheless, despite the imperialist practice of imposing epistemic violence on its subjects, the subaltern would have the means to speak their condition. The problem, here, is represented by the programmatic and conscious, on the part of the dominant culture, process of depriving the marginalized culture of those circumstances which Spivak recognizes as necessary. An exemplifying instance of this observation can be found in the fact that, for the Igbo pots, as representatives of the autochthonous, pre-colonization Igbo culture, to be demarginalized and appreciated, Richard’s presence was necessary. While the Igbo pots would be, in themselves, able to speak their cultural relevance, Richard’s attention towards them was necessary, as an instrumental vehicle, for them to actually speak and be heard. Therefore, while the ekphrastic writing, tied with the notion of prosopopoeia, would envoice an artifact, in a postcolonial and marginalized culture, for these artifacts to actually be envoiced requires the intermediation of someone who can speak, who

does not suffer from the practice of epistemic violence, a member of the dominant culture, such as Richard himself.

A similar consideration can be applied to Saleem's experience in *Midnight's Children*. Indeed, it is through the ekphrastic description of Millais' *The Boyhood of Raleigh* that Saleem is able to speak, by contrast, his own autochthonous self, defining his own identity by contrast to what he beholds in Millais' painting. Just as Richard, the painting is instrumental in allowing Saleem to voice his own reflections about the insurmountable differences between himself and the proud English youth immortalized by Millais in the act of scrutinizing the horizon. Quoting from Said, Spivak recognize this as "the problem of 'the permission to narrate'" (25). In both cases, the "permission to narrate" and therefore speak a culture is presented. On one hand, as will be later specifically analyzed, the colonizer, Richard, is instrumental in order to grant to the subaltern, Igbo, culture to be narrated and to speak. On the other, the interaction with a manifestation of the dominant, English, culture is instrumental in order for Saleem to narrate himself and speak.

Therefore, while both subaltern cultures would be able to speak themselves, it is necessary for them to interact with the dominant culture in order to do so. This problem of being able to speak oneself and one's culture is not restricted only to ekphrastic practices in both these novels but, as will be later explored, it is also extended to the language in which both texts are written. The anglophone nature of both *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Midnight's Children* reinforces the reading according to which, in order for the subaltern to speak, they must adopt some aspects, in this case the linguistic and formal ones, proper of the dominant, colonizing culture.

## Linguistic and Cultural Hegemony

Furthering Spivak's argument, in relation to the artworks presented in these novels being able to speak their own condition, I shall now briefly look at some theoretical reflections regarding the language employed in these texts, as it reflects also, I believe, on the relevance of their ekphrastic passages. What must first be noticed, is the historical superimposition of the colonizer's language, English in both these novels, over the autochthonous ones. Such a culturally hegemonic program led, however, to the English language becoming "the common language with which to present a nationalist front against white oppressors" (Mphahlele qtd. in Thiong'o 25). Both these novels, written in the language of the colonizer, aim to explore and subvert cultural colonial relations, through their attention to visual art. In this regard, the employment of the dominant language can be read as an answer to Spivak's question: the subaltern may speak as long as they employ the cultural tools provided by the colonizing culture.

The instrumentalization of language becomes, thus, a means to be able to investigate and present, as both Adichie and Rushdie do, the consequences of colonial domination. As Chinua Achebe claimed in his speech "The African Writer and the English Language," "is it right that a man should abandon his mother tongue for someone else's? It looks like a dreadful betrayal and produces a guilty feeling. *But for me there is no other choice. I have been given the language and I intend to use it*" (qtd. in Thiong'o 25, emphasis added). The dominant language, as the Millais painting in Rushdie's novel, gazed at by Saleem, and the Igbo pots as re-mediated by Richard in Adichie's, becomes a necessary tool of expression for the marginalized to speak and present their condition. In other words, as Raja Rao defines it, the appropriated language can be employed to "convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own" (qtd. in Ashcroft et al. 38). What must be remembered is that, as I discussed earlier, the programmatic

superimposition of the colonizer's language onto the colonized autochthonous one, was enacted in order to achieve cultural hegemony. As Thiong'o observes, "the bullet was the means of the physical subjugation. Language was the means of the spiritual subjugation" (287). The hybridity of language is a distinctive, as well as profoundly interesting, feature of both *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Midnight's Children*. In the employment of the English language and the model of the traditional English XIX century novel, can be observed how the marginalized can employ the cultural tools of domination used by the colonizer, to demarginalize themselves and present an investigation of colonial relations. As Thiong'o observes,

language as culture is the collective memory bank of a people's experience in history. Culture is almost indistinguishable from the language that makes possible its genesis, growth, banking, articulation and indeed its transmission from one generation to the next... (...). Communication creates culture: culture is a means of communication. Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world. (289-290)

It must, therefore, be noticed, in the investigation of the ekphrastic passages in both novels, not only their significance in relation to the historical and political context in which the artworks were either produced or observed, but also the language in which such descriptions were conveyed by the authors. In Thiong'o's reflections regarding the employment of the English language in African literature, can be observed an answer to Spivak's question, as well as an instance of the cultural domination exercised by the colonizer on the colonized. In exploring the ekphrastic passages of these novels, it must be borne in mind that it is through the representation of the character's relations to cultural artifacts or artworks that both Adichie and Rushdie

investigate the legacy of colonial dominance in both Nigeria and India. As Thiong'o notices that "culture is a means of communication," so through the representation of culture, in visual art as will be later explored, and in language, as was briefly observed here, the consequences of colonial domination, and the intrinsic struggles it left behind, be it linguistic, cultural, political, or economical, are investigated by both Adichie and Rushdie.

### **Theoretic Overview**

In conclusion of this chapter, I will briefly explore some relevant issues raised by postcolonial theory which will be essential in my analysis of the ekphrastic passages contained in *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Midnight's Children*. One first notion which must be emphasized, as it is central in analyzing these novels, is that of cultural hegemony. It can be argued that, although the imperial power, in both these cases Britain, does not exercise any longer a direct political authority over its previous colonial domains, its influence is still exercised through culture and language. Indeed, "nevertheless, through the literary canon, the body of British texts which all too frequently still act as a touchstone of taste and value" still dominate "the cultural production in much of the postcolonial world" (Ashcroft et al. 7). The preponderant presence of British culture in its previous colonial domains is evident in both these novels. As a matter of fact, in Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* it is rendered explicitly how, in order for the autochthons culture, the Igbo one, to be demarginalized it has to be re-mediated by the English character, Richard. It is through his interest in Nigerian indigenous artifacts that they are brought to the foreground of artistic discussion in the novel. Similarly, the legacy of British imperialism and colonization is evidently portrayed in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. The presence of British domination looms over the life of young Saleem, as exemplified by the presence of Millais' *The Boyhood of*

*Raleigh* in his childhood bedroom. Such an instance perfectly portrays how the young Indian character must face his country's colonial past every day, while finding a way to relate to it.

The presence of the colonial, British, past is not merely evident in the ekphrastic passages contained in these novels, but also, as mentioned earlier, in the language in which they are written. In this regard it is worth to look at the implications that using the colonizer's language has on these stories, how the linguistic aspect is fundamental in the postcolonial reading of these works. Turning once more to postcolonial theory, it must be emphasized how "one of the main features of imperial oppression is control over language (...). Language becomes the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated, and the medium through which conceptions of 'truth', 'order', and 'reality' become established" (Ashcroft et al. 7). However, as previously mentioned, in both these anglophone novels, the English standard language becomes tainted and expanded by the autochthonous diction and lexicon proper of the culture which is speaking. In such a case, can be observed an instance of hybridity of language. In both Adichie's and Rushdie's novels the English language, which predominates the text, is accompanied by autochthonous verbal expressions, as to represent that in order to convey the complexity of the colonial and postcolonial experience, both the imposed and indigenous languages must be employed. As the setting and culture portrayed in these novels is hybrid, in the sense that it results from the superimposition of an imposed, foreign, culture and language on the native ones, so the language through which they are explored must be hybrid. "We need" indeed, "to distinguish between what is proposed as a standard code, English (the language of the erstwhile imperial centre), and the linguistic code, english, which has been transformed and subverted into several distinctive varieties" (Ashcroft et al 8). What must be remembered is that "the language of these 'peripheries' was shaped by an oppressive discourse of power" which still dictates the

canon for emerging postcolonial literatures (Ashcroft et al 8). In the choice to investigate the legacy of colonial relations through the English language can be observed an instance of mimicry, as for these stories to be presented, they have to be in a language accessible, and proper, of the colonial dominant culture.

Such a discourse about the appropriation and remediation of language can be explored in its noticeable parallelisms with the appropriation and remediation of culture, as exemplified in the artworks, on which the ekphrastic passages in both novels focus. What must first be stated is that “the crucial function of language as a medium of power demands that post-colonial writing defines itself by seizing the language of the centre and replacing it in a discourse fully adapted to the colonized place” (Ashcroft et al. 37). Such a tension can be explored, in the context of these novels, with regards to the relation between the artworks described and the imperial center. This assertion is explicitly exemplified in Rushdie’s novel, as Saleem gazes at the image of the imperial centre, Millais’ painting, finding it misplaced in his own bedroom, in the immediate aftermath of Indian independence. In his struggle to “replace” and “adapt” the imperially denoted artwork, can be observed Saleem’s own struggling with his nation’s colonial past and with his sense of non-belonging to the grand narrative depicted by Millais. As Ashcroft et al. put it,

language is adopted as a tool and utilized in various ways to express widely different cultural experiences (...). For in one sense all post-colonial literatures are cross-cultural because they negotiate a gap between “worlds”, a gap in which the simultaneous process of abrogation and appropriation continually strive to define and determinate their practice. (Ashcroft et al. 38)

Such cross-cultural negotiation of the “gap between ‘worlds’” is evident in the ekphrastic descriptions contained in both Adichie and Rushdie. In both cases, is to be found a tension between

the culture received, as by Saleem, and the culture autochthonously produced, as the Igbo pots. In this dialectic can be found the space to investigate the cultural dynamics of power between the colonizer and the colonized.

### ***3. Midnight's Children***

John Everett Millais' painting *The Boyhood of Raleigh* is given great relevance in Rushdie's 1981 novel *Midnight's Children*. Millais was part of the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood who, established in the Victorian era, sought a return, in both painting style and subject matter, to previous traditions. As I will explore later in this chapter, Millais' painting is connoted by imperialist iconographic associations. In this work the experience of the boy Saleem, born in the midnight hour of Indian independence, parallels that of his country, as this novel can be read as allegorically representing the historical events preceding and following India's independence from Britain. The protagonist, Saleem Sinai, is endowed with telepathic powers. In the novel, the fragmentation of the protagonist follows that of the ex-British colony. It is significant that a picture steeped in colonial and imperialist implications hangs on Saleem's bedroom wall, looming, effectively, over his existence. The ekphrastic description of Millais' painting in *Midnight's Children* enhances and furthers the postcolonial reading of this novel. In my analysis I will focus as much on the ekphrastic description per se, as on what it communicates in the broader context of this novel, and on how it expands the reader's understanding of the complexity of the postcolonial cultural relations of power between the colonizer and colonized.

#### **The Fishermen**

Before proceeding to analyze in detail the ekphrastic description of Millais' painting, I will briefly notice the recurrence of the iconographic subject matter of the British painting from the very first pages of the novel. Key in Millais' painting is the figure of the old fisherman, scrutinizing the vast sea and pointing out to the aristocratic youth the horizon with his finger,

beyond which lies what can be conquered. The apparition of this British pointing fisherman is prepared and foreshadowed by Rushdie through the depiction of many, autochthonous fisherman in the early chapters of the novel. Indeed, before the painting is presented to the readers through Saleem's description of it, they will have already met many doubles to Millais' fisherman, all natives and presented in the context of their own culture. It is Saleem himself who draws a parallel between the culturally invested figures of Millais' fisherman, exemplifying, arguably, the British imperial ambition, and the old Kashmiri boatman Tai. While narrating his grandfather Adaam's life, as prelude and historical and cultural context to his own, Saleem observes,

Memory of my blue bedroom wall: on which, next to the P.M.'s letter, *the Boy Raleigh hung for many years, gazing rapturously at an old fisherman* in what looked like a red dhoti, who sat on—what? —driftwood? —and pointed out to the sea as he told his fishy tales... *and the Boy Adaam, my grandfather-to-be, fell in love with the boatman Tai* precisely because of the endless verbiage which made others think him cracked. It was magical talk (...), soaring up to the most remote Himalayas of the past, then swooping shrewdly on some present detail, (...). *Tai, forecasting the fisherman on my wall, pointed at the mountains. "So old, nakkoo!"*. (Rushdie 11-13, emphasis added)

Several are the details worth noticing in this early description of *The Boyhood of Raleigh*. What must first be noticed is how Saleem parallels the colonizer's depiction of the fisherman, as imperialistically connoted in his role as a guide to the young Raleigh, to his own culture's boatman.

A first instance of appropriation of the colonizer's means of artistic expression to convey the postcolonial experience lived by Saleem is the result of this parallelism. In this regard, it is worth noticing the diction which Saleem employs to describe Millais' fisherman. Indeed, he

describes him clothed in a garment which “looked like a red dhoti”. In this choice of vocabulary can be read the narrator’s effort to translate the colonizer’s cultural manifestation into terms which he can understand and relate to his own life. The experiences, therefore, of the young Raleigh and those of the young Adaam, are paralleled on an iconographic level by the narrator Saleem. Albeit the comparison is explicit, the differences between these two youths are not rendered explicitly but the narrator. A first difference worth noticing is that of the landscape through which these two fishermen move and are concerned with. While Millais’ old fisherman points out toward the vastity of the endless and conquerable horizon, bringing the young Raleigh with him, through his tales into the limitless of the conquerable, Tai can only row young Adaam, in his shikara through a landlocked lake. Another difference worth noticing is that of the temporal scope of these fishermen’s narratives. Whereas Millais’ old fisherman points young Raleigh forwards, towards the future of his exploratory endeavors, Tai is mainly concerned with tales of the past. As Saleem notices in the passage quoted above, Tai’s tales moved from the generality of the past to specificity of the present, and never beyond the present, that is, never venturing into the future. In contrast, the narrative movement of Millais’ fisherman’s gesture is explicitly outwards, both spatially and temporally. He does, indeed, take the young Raleigh of the present and moves him toward his own future, in which gesture can be read a representation of Britain’s own imperialist and colonialist future. Another exemplification in the text of such opposite movements of narrative can be found in the landscape in which these characters move. The motion of Millais’ limitless sea is manifestly outwards and towards something, while Tai’s is that of a circumscribed lake, inevitably limited and still. It is interesting, therefore, to notice how the characters of Raleigh and Adaam, and of Millais’ fisherman and Tai, both culturally connoted, are both paralleled and contrasted by Saleem. From this early and brief ekphrastic

description it is also evident how young Saleem strives to translate his own cultural, autochthonous experiences through the expressive means of the colonizer “other”. Such a tendency will be rendered even more evident in Saleem’s detailed ekphrastic description of Millais’ painting later in the narrative. The young Indian character strives to find a parallel of the colonizer’s grand narratives in his own culture, exemplified here through Adaam Aziz. Simultaneously, it is here evident how Saleem tries to make sense of his own culture and national experience searching for echoes of that in the British narrative. Saleem must appropriate the colonizer’s means of artistic expression in order to convey, by opposition, his own culture and history. In this regard, it must be mentioned that “analyzing ekphrastic strategies employed in literary works by postcolonial writers is not only an undertaking in poetics, but also a negotiation of political and ethical issues which includes a renegotiation of ‘imperial legacies and the ensuing predominance of Eurocentric epistemologies’” (Rippl 130).

Another instance worth noticing in regard to the presence of indigenous fishermen as foreshadowing of Millais’ colonially connoted one, is to be found in the narrative’s portrayal of the period immediately preceding the Indian independence. In terms of the fisherman as a cultural symbol and representation I shall look at an historiographic excursus made by Saleem in his narration, as Mountbatten’s clock ticks away toward independence. Saleem observes,

*The fishermen were here first.* Before Mountbatten’s ticktock, before monsters and public announcements; when underworld marriages were still unimagined and spittoons were unknown; earlier than Mercurochrome; (...) and back and back, beyond Dalhousie and Elphinstone, before the East India Company built its Fort, before the first William Methwold; (...)—in short, before reclamation, (...); in this primeval

world before clocktowers, the fishermen—who were called Kolis—sailed in Arab dhows, spreading red sails against the setting sun. (Rushdie 121, emphasis added)

In this exemplifying passage, Saleem parallels his own familial history, one built and represented through underworld marriages and spittoons, to that of his country. It must be noticed how the temporal landscape is divided by Saleem as composed of a before and after the British colonization of India. Such division is emphasized by Saleem in claiming how “the fishermen were here first”. They were here before the colonial history of India began, as well as his own personal one. They were here before the colonial implications of the British establishment in India of centers of trade were even imaginable, before Millais could even imagine his own fisherman, and before the imperialist ambition communicated and represented through him were foreseeable.

In this passage, which immediately precedes Saleem’s ekphrastic description of the Millais painting, can be observed a reclaiming of the iconography employed by the British colonizer to communicate their imperialist ambitions of knowing and conquering that which lays beyond the fisherman’s pointing finger towards the horizon. Therefore, before presenting his readers with the ekphrastic description of Millais’ imperially connoted painting, Rushdie explicitly presents the autochthonous fishermen, a cultural symbol, to which the British one will be opposed.

### **“The Fisherman’s Pointing Finger”<sup>1</sup>**

Having thus analyzed the implications of the iconography contained in Millais’ painting, I will now proceed to explore its ekphrastic description in *Midnight’s Children*. What must first

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<sup>1</sup> From Saleem’s description of the Millais painting (Rushdie 166)

be noticed is the point in the narrative in which this ekphrastic passage occurs. Saleem's description of Millais' painting opens the second book of the novel, being placed, therefore, immediately after both his and India's as an autonomous political entity birth. "The fisherman's pointing finger:" recounts Saleem,

Unforgettable focal point of the picture which hang on a sky-blue wall in the Buckingham Villa, directly above the sky-blue crib in which, as Baby Saleem, midnight's child, I spent my earliest days. The young Raleigh—and who else? —sat, framed in teak, at the feet of an old, gnarled, net mending sailor—did he have a walrus moustache? —whose right arm, fully extended, stretched out towards a watery horizon, while his liquid tales rippled around the fascinated ears of Raleigh—and *who else?* (Rushdie 166, emphasis added)

Before analyzing how Saleem relates to this picture, placed on his bedroom wall beside the newspaper clipping enouncing the birth of India's "midnight child" that is, Saleem himself, it is worth to look at the cultural and colonial implications contained in such a picture. It must first be noticed how ekphrasis is employed by Rushdie as a means of cultural negotiation between the colonized, observing the artwork, and the colonizer, depicted in it. As Rippl observes, Rushdie in *Midnight's Children* "employs intermedial strategies such as ekphrases of photographs and paintings in order to negotiate the ambivalence of and tensions of post/colonial politics and India's 'fraught relations' to the social other, 'to English high culture'" (134-135). In order to fully understand how ambivalence can be mediated and negotiated through ekphrasis, the imperial implications of Millais' painting must be addressed. As Kortenaar observes, the print hanging in Saleem's childhood bedroom is "based on Millais' tribute to empire" as its setting is "presumably Raleigh's native Devon and the sailor is pointing west to the New World;" worth

noticing is that this painting, and therefore its print, “depicts the moment when Raleigh first conceived the dream of making history: we understand that the sailor’s stories of the New World will inspire the young Raleigh to go himself in search of El Dorado, in the voyage he will later record in *The Discovery of Guiana*” (“England and Mimicry” 172-173). Therefore, in the subject matter of this print can be observed an instance of what Barthes defined as “pregnant moments”. As Thomas observed, “colonialism has always been a cultural process, its discoveries and processes are imagined and energized through signs, metaphors and narratives” (qtd. in Eaton 15). The moment here immortalized by Millais and re-mediated by Rushdie is one colonial and imperialist ambition, as the young Raleigh arguably conceives his desire to explore and conquer for the first time, through the sailor’s tales.

Having thus described the subject matter of Millais’ painting in its colonial and imperialist implications and connotations, it must now be analyzed both its spatial and temporal location withing Rushdie’s narrative. What must first be noticed is that the ekphrastic description of Millais’ print immediately follows Saleem’s birth. As Kortenaar mentions, “the print stand at the threshold of book 2 and marks Saleem’s entry as a character in the narrative of his own life” (“Postcolonial Ekphrasis” 232). The reader is therefore immediately led, by the very structure of the narrative, to assimilate Saleem’s birth and entry on the scene with the depiction of the young Raleigh. Even more relevant, given the non-negligible imperial implications of this painting, is the parallelism traced by Rushdie between Saleem as representative of the newly independent India and the still present cultural influence of England, exemplified by *The Boyhood of Raleigh*. The parallelism between Saleem the individual and his own country is rendered explicitly in the novel, as the narrator mentions a newspaper clipping located in his bedroom, through which Jawaharlal Nehru expresses good wishes for the newborn midnight child, and which reads, “we

shall be watching over your life with the closest attention; *it will be, in a sense, the mirror of our own*” (Rushdie 167, emphasis added). Given its place on Saleem’s bedroom wall, the propagandistic print is arguably “the first representational object of which he became aware of” (Kortenaar, “Postcolonial Ekphrasis” 232). In this regard, it must be mentioned how Saleem’s process of formation of his own identity, growing up, would have been informed and influenced by the painting hanging over his bed. Saleem grows up gazing at Millais’ print, defining himself in contrast to it, noticing how he does not see himself, or his culture, represented in it, as will be later explored in detail. Metaphorically, thus, since the link between Saleem and his country is deeply emphasized in the narrative, as they were born in the same exact moment, the politically autonomous India has, too, to develop its own identity with the looming influence of the British imperialist and colonialist legacy.

Not only the moment in the narrative in which it is presented is relevant, but also the spatial positioning of Millais’ painting as depicted in the novel. As mentioned earlier, the Millais print is hanging in Saleem’s childhood bedroom, as a focal point of his development. According to Kortenaar, “the print has been hung in baby Saleem’s bedroom by his parents so that he might identify with Raleigh. The Sinais heed the picture’s call to make history, a task that is figured in terms of repeating the heroic narrative of the past and extending that narrative into the future” (“Postcolonial Ekphrasis” 235). Therefore, in such an intent can be read the intention to extend the grand narrative of heroic deeds, exemplified as British by Millais’ painting, unto Saleem. In this practice can be observed a manifestation of England’s still looming cultural power over the newly independent Indian imagination. Worth noticing, is where precisely the print is located. Saleem narrates how the fisherman’s finger

pointed even further than that shimmering horizon, it pointed beyond teak frame, across a brief expanse of sky-blue wall, driving my eyes towards another frame, in which my inescapable destiny hung, forever fixed under glass: here was a jumbo-sized baby-snap with its prophetic captions, and here, beside it, a letter on high quality vellum, embossed with the seal of state. (Rushdie 167)

What must be noticed in this passage is how tightly linked Saleem's existence is to the Raleigh painting. Interestingly, the fisherman's finger, pointing towards what can be conquered by England, points towards Saleem himself. However, as Kortenaar fittingly observes, "the postcolonial is not an innocent viewer" ("Postcolonial Ekphrasis" 232). Therefore, as Saleem represents, in the novel, the newborn life of independent India, so the fisherman's pointing finger must be interpreted as pointing towards it. Readable on two different temporal dimensions, the pointing finger guides Raleigh, in the historical past, towards what he can conquer in his—Britain's—imperial ambitions. In the chronotope of the novel, however, the sailor's finger points towards Saleem and the newly achieved Indian independence from England, extending its linguistic and artistic influence over it, as exemplified by the presence of the painting itself. As Kortenaar argues, "the finger of destiny pointing to the writing on the wall reminds us that, with the fight for independence, history ceased to be the purview of European nations and has been made by Indians" ("Postcolonial Ekphrasis" 236-237). Saleem observes,

perhaps the fisherman's finger was not pointing at the letter in the frame; because of one followed it even further, *it led one out through the window*, down the two-storey hillock, across Warden Road, beyond Breach Candy Pools, and out to another sea which was not the sea in the picture; *a sea on which the sails of Koli dhows glowed scarlet in the setting sun.* (Rushdie 268, emphasis added)

Therefore, the sailor's finger can be read as pointing toward India itself. Interestingly, echoing his previous description of the Kashmiri boatmen, Saleem continues to relate the Millais painting to his own autochthonous culture. The narrator equates in his mind the sea the sailor is pointing towards, one which will be crossed by Raleigh in his expansion endeavors, to the one on which "the sails of Koli dhows glowed". In such a practice what Barnaby describes as the tendency to inscribe "India within a Western ideology of representation" can be observed (qtd. in Petit 207). Such a tendency is necessary for Saleem to "speak" his culture, expressed in contrast to the colonizer's form of representation, yet needing their cultural 'tongue' and means of expression to do so. As Kortenaar notices,

Saleem's ekphrasis, while seemingly respectful of the painting, *is an attempt to appropriate it for himself*. Ekphrasis, Mitchell reminds us, is always political: the contest between the visual and the verbal arts as to which can tell the more effective or more accurate story always reflects "a struggle for territory, a contest of rival ideologies". ("Postcolonial Ekphrasis" 236, emphasis added)

Thus, Saleem's own relation with the painting and its subject matter is paramount, as it reveals important information regarding the cultural tension between the colonizer and the colonized.

### **Saleem's Gaze: "Another Boy"<sup>2</sup>**

In Saleem's observing, and therefore describing, Millais' *The Boyhood of Raleigh*, can be observed an interesting dynamic, that is, the colonized, or previously colonized, subject gazing at the artistic expression of the colonizer. As mentioned earlier, the artwork gazed at by Saleem is one steeped in colonialist and imperialist connotations. As Saleem gazes at the Millais print, he

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<sup>2</sup> From Saleem's ekphrastic description (Rushdie 166)

does not merely report what he beholds; rather, and significantly, he critically analyzes the scene depicted by the British painter, intercepting its narrative. Moreover, Saleem, a critical observer, recognizes the extent to which he, exemplifying of his culture, is not represented or included by Millais in his depiction of imperialist ambition. Saleem notices that the composition of the picture does not include only the young Raleigh and the old sailor, but another unknown and unnamed figure, paramount in the postcolonial reading of this ekphrastic passage. Saleem narrates,

Because there was certainly another boy in the picture, sitting cross-legged in frilly collar and button-down tunic...and now a memory comes back to me: a birthday party in which a proud mother and an equally proud ayah dressed a child with a gargantuan nose in such a collar, just such a tunic. A tailor sat in a sky-blue room, beneath the pointing finger, and copied the attire of the English milords... “Look, how *chweet!*” Lila Sabarmati exclaimed to my eternal mortification, “It’s like he stepped out of the *picture!*”. (Rushdie 166-167)

What must be noticed, in this passage, is the fact that Saleem immediately identifies himself not with Raleigh, set on the path of glory and conquest, but with the other, anonymous, youth. What must also be emphasized is that Saleem’s identification with the nameless youth is partly informed by his mother and Mary Pereira’s consciously dressing him in a way that would resemble, hence mimic, the “English milords”.

It must thus be noticed that, even because of his mother’s design in dressing him, Saleem identifies with the nameless youth. Significant is the fact that both the young Raleigh and the anonymous lad are listening to the same inspiring tale; however, it is only Raleigh, richly dressed and not clothed in a “button-down tunic”, who will be able to act on the desire and ambition

inspired by the old sailor's tales. Whilst they sit on the same shore and hear the same promise of imperial grandeur, only Raleigh is endowed with the cultural power to act on his desires of exploration and domination. Indeed, "in Bombay, young Saleem, who feels no qualms about identifying with the imperialists in the tableau, identifies, however, (...) with the second boy in the painting. This second boy is not dressed in the bright colors of the sailor or Raleigh," he is depicted as smaller and darkly dressed, "he resembles nothing so much as Raleigh's shadow" (Kortenaar, "Postcolonial Ekphrasis" 254).

Saleem therefore gazes at the colonizer's manifestation of artistic expression and, arguably, imperialist propaganda, without seeing himself in it, in an exemplification of postcolonial alterity. Even more relevantly, he projects his own cultural and national identity onto the anonymous youth who will not be able to act on the desires incited by the sailor's tale. Notably, the fisherman and Raleigh, in the picture, are placed one in front of the other, in direct communication, perpendicular to the horizon and its promises. Opposingly, the black-dressed youth is outside of their line of visual contact and, even more relevant, is placed with his back turned towards the horizon. Such posture informs the postcolonial reading of his representing Saleem himself, —as Saleem represents independent India—unable to conquer that which lays at the end of the fisherman's pointing finger, as it is someone else's dominion, as it is completely out of his reach. As Kortenaar explains, "the anonymous lad who has heard the same tale as Raleigh but who is not remembered (...)—is in the position of the colonized who have listened to and read English history, have been inspired by the models of English history makers, but will never be remembered in English history" ("Postcolonial Ekphrasis" 256). Such a consideration can be applied to Saleem himself, as arguably, his parents chose to hang that specific print onto his bedroom wall in order to inspire him, as the fisherman inspired Raleigh. Therefore, he, too,

through his gazing at the painting is “listening” and observing the “English history makers” without participating in it, just as Millais’ nameless youth. The painting serves, therefore, as a “reminder that history has already be made by others” (Kortenaar, “Postcolonial Ekphrasis” 245).

Therefore, in some way, Saleem needs the artistic forms of expression of the colonizer in order to speak himself and his culture. Of interest, in this regard, is the fact that he immediately inserts himself in the British painting, albeit in an undoubtedly secondary role. Still, in order to present himself he has to put himself in relation to the British iconography. In such a practice can be read an answer to Spivak’s question, as Saleem is able to speak himself—as representative, as aforementioned, of independent India—as he relates himself to the colonizer’s means of cultural expression. Therefore, he has to borrow the iconography and means of self-representation of the colonizer on order to fit himself, literally, into the picture. Worthy of notice is also the fact that, as a child, Saleem was dressed up as one of the “English milords” by his mother and nurse Mary Pereira. In their choice can be read the immediate consequence of hanging the Millais picture in Saleem’s bedroom as a means of inspiration. In order to enter the narrative, Saleem has to play the part of one who can be represented in the British painting, in an evident display of mimicry.

### **Postcolonial Ekphrasis and the Novel**

In the largest context of this novel, the ekphrastic passages mentioned are paramount in performing a postcolonial reading of it. What must particularly be emphasized, starting from the ekphrasis contained in *Midnight’s Children*, is how the picture depicted, and the gaze through which it is described in the text, reveals information regarding the cultural power dynamics explored in this novel. It is thus worth to examine issues of hybridity, both linguistic and artistic,

and of colonial dominance as they emerge from the ekphrastic passage. Through Saleem's ekphrastic description are perfectly exemplified the power dynamics which regulate the cultural relation between the colonizer and the colonized. As aforementioned, Saleem gazes at the imperialistically connoted artwork without seeing himself represented in its grandiose rhetoric of conquest and metanarrative of exploration and domination. However, still he has to "appropriate" the colonizer's means of artistic expression to present, by contrast, his own personal and national identity, as well as history. Therefore, in order for him to "speak," Saleem has to adopt the artistic, as well as linguistic, means of expression of the dominant culture. This notion lends itself particularly well as a starting point to explore the instances of hybridity and mimicry contained in this novel.

The postcolonial notion of hybridity, and, to some extent, creolization, is immediately recognizable in Saleem's ekphrastic description. Indeed, the narrator regards the Millais picture as a representation of something completely external to his own culture, as he identifies himself with the anonymity of the youth and not the metanarrative of Raleigh. However, he still identifies in it, for instance in the diction employed to describe the sailor's clothes, and in the figure of the old fisherman, autochthonous elements. As Petit argues, Rushdie's novel represents the "triumph of postmodern and postcolonial hybridity in its wealth and diversity" (207). In order to analyze how issues of cultural, as well as linguistic, hybridity and specifically creolization arise from the novel, particularly exemplifying and useful is the description that Saleem gives of himself. In this regard, it is worth to reiterate that Saleem himself can be read as embodying and symbolizing the newly independent Indian political identity. Shortly after describing the Millais print in his bedroom, Saleem describes himself as a newborn. From a narrative postcolonial perspective, it must be noticed that Saleem describes himself only after

having established, by contrast with the colonizer as depicted by Millais, what he is not. The narrator describes himself as follows,

I was not a beautiful baby. Baby-snaps reveal that my large moon-face was too large; too perfectly round. Something lacking in the region of the chin. *Fair skin* curved across my features—but *birthmarks* disfigured it; *dark stains* spread down my *western hairline*, a dark patch colored my eastern ear. And my temples: too prominent: bulbous *Byzantine domes*. (Rushdie 169, emphasis added)

The very physiognomy of Saleem, the midnight's child of Indian independence, speaks of the hybridity and historical stratification of his identity. On his face seem to coexist, perhaps not peacefully and certainly not harmoniously, western and eastern features, such as his "western hairline" and "eastern ear". Of course, the rational explanation for this is to be found in the text, as Saleem's biological parents are the wealthy British Methwold and the poor Indian Vanita. Nevertheless, the boy Saleem, in his facial features, practically exemplifies the cultural hybridity of India in the immediate aftermath of independence. In him there is still a trace of Britain, as exemplified by his father Methwold, combined with his autochthonous identity, as represented by his mother. Saleem himself represents a sort of cultural creolization, as his identity emerges from the ethnic and cultural mix of his country's colonial legacy and his own autochthonous heritage.

Furthering the analysis of the power dynamics explored in *Midnight's Children* and exemplified in *The Boyhood of Raleigh*, it is pertinent to notice how hybridity in this text is not conveyed only through the ekphrastic passage, in its connotations, or by Saleem himself, but also through the language and diction employed. As Kortenaar observes, "Saleem's hybrid identity blends (...) India and England. The novel implicitly makes the claim that English is now an

Indian language” adding that “the way that Saleem’s India include England is more akin to imitation and contamination than to containment” (“England and Mimicry” 167). It must indeed be noticed how, in order for this story to be told, Rushdie had to employ the English language, in a not dissimilar way to the fact that for Saleem to affirm and present himself on the scene the presence of the Millais painting, in its imperialist implications, was necessary. In both cases, can be observed an appropriation and instrumentalization of the colonizer’s means of expression by the colonizer in order to present themselves. We are thus returning to Spivak’s question, finding its answer in the dimension of hybridity and mimicry of this text. As aforementioned, linguistically speaking, in this anglophone text are to be found autochthons Indian expressions.

Thus, this linguistic as well as cultural and iconographic hybridity can be understood as necessary in order to truthfully portray and convey the complexity and struggle of postcolonial relations between the colonizer and the colonized. The English language is thus appropriated by Rushdie, in the same spirit in which Achebe claimed, “I have been given the language and I intend to use it”. In this case, the mimetic use of the English language, as well as of the colonizer’s means of expression is employed in order to convey the hybrid complexity of relations between the colonizer and the colonized. Complexity which is evident both from a linguistic and artistic perspective. Exemplified by the ekphrastic description of Millais’ *The Boyhood of Raleigh* is also the hierarchic cultural power relation between the colonized gazing at the colonizer’s imperially connoted means of self-expression. The colonized does recognize himself in the metanarrative portrayed by the painting, but still, he needs it, as well as the colonizer’s dominant language, in order to define his identity and present himself.

#### 4. *Half of a Yellow Sun*

In this chapter I will analyze an instance of ekphrastic writing which subverts and juxtaposes the one presented in *Midnight's Children*. Indeed, if Saleem's description of Millais' painting offered an instance of the colonized looking at the artistic, and propagandistic, expression of the colonizer, *Half of a Yellow Sun* offers the opposite dynamic: the colonizer gazing at the artistic expression of the colonized. Nonetheless, the reflections I have proposed in the postcolonial reading of the written representation of *The Boyhood of Raleigh* are here still valid. The first difference to be noted is that the artifacts presented by Adichie in her novel are entirely autochthonous. The Igbo-Ukwu pots which so fascinate Richard Churchill, the only prominent British character of this novel and, more relevantly, the only British character who is given a voice to narrate his perspective on the Biafran secession, date back to a pre-colonization era. Even in this case, the ekphrastic description of culturally connoted artifacts ontologically entails Spivak's question, "can the subaltern speak?". In this case, the positive answer to the mentioned question appears to lie in the dominant culture, the British one embodied, at least externally, in Richard, taking it upon itself to 'speak' it. That is, the autochthonous artifacts, in their being presented to the reader, at least until the very last pages of the novel in which Adichie subverts this assumption, are re-mediated by the dominant culture, the colonizer's one. In Richard's entitlement in taking this task of re-mediation upon himself, is to be found the colonizer's fallacy and pretension in patronizingly siding with the colonized. In this chapter, I will closely analyze the ekphrastic descriptions of the Igbo-Ukwu pots, as presented by Richard,

paying attention to their cultural significance in post decolonization Nigeria. I will then analyze Richard's gaze in describing the artifacts and his relation to them. Lastly, I will explore how the ekphrastic description of the Igbo-Ukwu post enhances the postcolonial reading of *Half of a Yellow Sun*, paying close attention to the issues of hybridity and cultural appropriation and re-mediation it raises, while noticing how such a relation, as the one tying Richard to the autochthonous Igbo artifacts, can be read as exemplifying of the cultural dynamics regulating the relation between the colonizer and the colonized in the post-decolonization Biafran war.

### **Historical “Pregnant Moments”: the Biafran War**

Before analyzing the numerous instances in the text in which Richard's fascination for the Igbo-Ukwu artifacts is explored, I will give some attention to this novel's historical setting. Following Barthes' reflection and definition of “pregnant moments” to be immortalized in art and literature, I will briefly notice the significance of the moment chosen by Adichie as the setting for her exploration of postcolonial dynamic of cultural appropriation and re-mediation. As in *Midnight's Children*, the ekphrastic description, which can be read in terms of representing the cultural power dynamic between the colonized and colonizer, acquires significance when placed in a precise, and “pregnant”, historical moment. If Saleem's ekphrastic description of Millais' *The Boyhood of Raleigh* fittingly explores the cultural relations between the newly independent India and the legacy of British colonialism, so Richard's fascination, and appropriation of autochthonous and Igbo artifacts—dating back before the British colonization—reflects the peculiar historical moment of post-colonization Nigeria. Richard's ekphrastic descriptions of the Igbo-Ukwu artifacts are mostly placed, in the novel, in the “pregnant moments” preceding the Biafran civil war. The readers of this novel, informed by their own

prejudice which the structure of the novel challenges, wrongly assume that all the metatextual passages of *The World Was Silent When We Died* presented in the text had Richard as their author. It is only at the very end of the novel that the readers are confronted with the error of their cultural assumption: Richard was never able to write his novel, and the passages cited in the text were extracted from Ugwu's novel, built on his firsthand experience of the Biafran war.

From the very beginning of the first chapter in which Adichie gives space to Richard's perspective, he is presented as a cultural "other" in Nigeria. The first time the reader meets Richard it is as he attends party composed by mostly British people residing in Nigeria. Richard described the company in attendance as "they were mostly English, ex-colonial administrators and business people (...). They chuckled about how tribal Nigerian politics was, and perhaps these chaps were not quite ready to rule themselves after all" (Adichie 53). The difference between the elitist and still politically entitled British ex-ruling class and Nigerians is presented immediately to the reader, as Richard attends uncomfortably this performance of patronization. It is also in this setting that Richard mentions for the first time his interest for the Igbo-Ukwu artifacts. What must here be mentioned to understand the cultural, as well as historical, setting in which Richard's ekphrastic descriptions are located, is the reading that the collective voice of the expatriates gives of Nigeria. When Richard mentions his desire to write a book on Nigeria, "they gave him brief smile and advice: The people were bloody beggars, be prepared for their body odours and the way they will stand and stare at you on the road, never believe a hard-luck story, never show weakness to the domestic staff. There were jokes to illustrate each African trait" (Adichie 53-54). From the very beginning of his narrative arc, Richard is depicted as uncomfortable with the cultural group to which he should belong, manifesting his interest and, later, loyalty, as lying elsewhere. Richard emerges undoubtedly as a more positive character than

his fellow expatriates in this context; yet, he is not too dissimilar in his intents. As the British expatriates feel entitled to give Richard advice and offer their insights regarding Nigerian culture and people, so Richard too is portrayed as having the proprietorial and entitled ambition of ‘owning’ and re-mediating Igbo culture. This section of social commentary and satire is also able to depict the tenuous cultural, as well as political, balances governing Nigeria in the aftermath of decolonization.

The historical moment in which *Half of a Yellow Sun*’s narrative evolves is a culturally complicated one. As Zulfiquar observes, “Nigeria was divided into four regions during the British rule (...). There were three major ethnic groups which dominated the country and played a crucial role in the power struggle, which contributed to the Nigerian civil war” (79). The politicization of ethnicity and cultural identity thus played a crucial role in the circumstances leading to the bloodshed of the Biafran secession. It is in this climate that Adichie inserts her story in which a prominent role is given to Richard’s desire and willingness to identify with the Igbo culture. In an historical setting, and a novel, in which the characters’ cultural identity is being heavily politicized, it is relevant to notice how a character, belonging to the previously dominant culture, such as Richard, relates ambiguously to the marginalized culture which he both appreciates, both seeks to appropriate. While the British domination of Nigeria had already come to an end by the early 1960’s when the novel begins, the cultural legacies of British imperialism were still prominent. Richard’s own desire of “appropriation and translation” of the Igbo culture, through its artifacts, can be read as an instance of “cultural imperialism” (Zulfiquar 101). The legacy of the British rule of Nigeria is constantly, implicitly or explicitly, alluded to in the text. In the second section of *The World was Silent When We Died*, which the reader wrongly

assumes was written by Richard, the historical circumstances leading to the Biafran war are lucidly listed, as the responsibility of the British is clearly recognized:

He discusses the British soldier-merchant Taubman Goldie (...) how, at the Berlin Conference of 1884 where Europeans divided Africa, he ensured that Britain beat France at two protectorates around the Niger River (...). The British preferred the North (...); the Hausa-Fulani were narrow-featured and therefore superior to the negroid Southerners, Muslims and therefore as civilized as one could get for natives (...). In the Southeast, the Igbo lived in small republican communities. They were non-docile and worryingly ambitious (...). Missionaries were allowed in to tame the pagans. (Adichie 115)

The very nature of the British “indirect rule” led to the division between the different cultural and ethnic groups which would then, in 1914, be unified into the Nigerian nation. It is the tension between these different groups which led to the Biafran civil war, in which the British aided the Nigerian, Hausa, faction since, “God always fights for the side which has more arms” (Adichie 334). It is in this context of politicized ethnic identities that Richard’s fascination for the Igbo culture and its artifacts is located. Before moving on to explore what Richard’s ekphrastic descriptions can reveal regarding the relation between the cultural legacy of British imperialism and the autochthonous Igbo culture, I will define the complicated historical setting of the novel through Odenigbo’s reflection, as it lends itself as a fitting starting point to explore the implications of Richard’s desire of re-mediation. As Odenigbo exclaims to Olanna before the Biafran secession, “the real tragedy of our 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” (Adichie 101).

### **“In the Time of Roped Pots”<sup>3</sup>: Richard’s Ekphrastic Descriptions**

Richard’s fascination with the Igbo-Ukwu pots is recurrently presented to the reader in most of the chapters narrated through his perspective, one of three limited points of view which are employed by Adichie following the model of the Victorian polyphonic novel, as I will explore in the following subchapters. In the very first chapter narrated from Richard’s perspective, he explains to his fellow expatriates his reasons for his coming to Nigeria. Indeed, “when Richard mentioned his interest in Igbo-Ukwu art, they said it didn’t have much of a market yet, so he did not bother to explain that he wasn’t at all interested in the money, it was the aesthetics that drew him in” (Adichie 53). Therefore, Richard’s fascination with the autochthonous Nigerian artifacts is presented, from the very beginning of Richard’s narrative arc, as a demarcating factor, emphasizing the difference between him and his fellow English expatriates. As Zulfiquar notices, Richard is “more preoccupied with collecting art work in Nigeria at a time of civil strife” while making “reductive comments on Nigerians” themselves “because of their ethnic background” (101). As the narrative progresses, Richard progressively presents his fascination for the Igbo-Ukwu artifacts as a symbol of his appreciation of Nigerian culture, and of his desire to belong to it. Richard does present his appreciation for the artifacts almost as a justification for his desire to be identified, later in the novel, as Biafran, or at least as a justification for his entitlement to Nigerian cultural citizenship. Remarkable, in this context, is a dialogue between Richard and Chief Ozobia, Kainene’s father, upon their first meeting. “I’m fascinated by the discoveries at Igbo-Ukwu. The bronze castings” states Richard, to which Chief Ozobia replies, “Hmm, (...) do you have any family doing business in Nigeria?” “no, I’m afraid

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<sup>3</sup> Richard’s title of his manuscript on Igbo-Ukwu art (Adichie 170).

not” (Adichie 64-65). Several are the elements of interest in this interaction. First of all, the assumption made by Chief Ozobia is that Richard is in Nigeria because of his own, or his family’s, business deals. This question follows immediately Richard’s statement about his fascination with the Igbo-Ukwu artifacts, as if to denote the impossibility of artistic appreciation being the sole reason for Richard’s presence in Nigeria at the time. Secondly, Richard’s desire to be immediately perceived by his lover’s family as an appreciator of Igbo art—and culture, is significant. The cited statement is virtually the first thing about himself that Richard discloses to Kainene’s Igbo family. Therefore, in Richard’s artistic appreciation of Igbo material culture is to be found also a desire for a certain self-representation. Richard wants to convey himself, and be perceived, as someone who appreciates the Igbo artifacts, in this context standing for Igbo culture and tradition, specifically by Nigerians, as if to justify, through his artistic appreciation, his desire for cultural assimilation.

Furthermore, not only Richard presents himself as a re-mediator of Igbo culture, as exemplified by his intention to write a book on it, but he is also perceived as such by some characters, while others resist and question his entitlement, as will be later explored. The most significant passage exemplifying of this instance is to be found in Richard’s ekphrastic description of the pots as he observes them in Igbo-Ukwu. In this case, as in Saleem’s ekphrastic description of *The Boyhood of Raleigh*, the description of the artifact cannot be absolutely separated from the postcolonial cultural and political discourse it entails. After leaving for Nsukka, Richard decides to stop in Igbo land to look at the archaeological discoveries of Nigerian art to be found there.

Pa Anozie (...) found a few others and brought them out, washed them, and called the neighbors to come in and see them. They looked well crafted and vaguely familiar, but

nobody knew of anyone making anything like them. (...) Then, a few years ago, *the white man from Ibadan came to excavate* (...). ‘Do you think they were used by the king?’ (...) ‘*The people of Igboland do not know what a king is* (...) it is because the white man gave us warrant chiefs that foolish men are calling themselves kings today’ (...). Richard sat there for a while, imagining the lives of people who were capable of such beauty, such complexity, *in the time of Alfred the Great*. (Adichie 70-72, emphasis added)

Several are the elements of interest which emerge from this passage. What must first be noticed, is how the role of the colonizer in the discovery is emphasized, and consequently how the significance of the pots is marginalized. It is “*the white man*” who came to excavate them, as Richard proposes himself as the one who will write about them. In this passage there is a hint of the cultural influence that the colonizer has had on the autochthonous Igbo culture, as Pa Anozie claims that Igbos never knew what a king was before “the white man gave us warrant chiefs”. Secondly, Richard continuously relates the history of the Igbo pots, and the cultural tradition which they exemplify, to his own national culture and history. The ‘British experience’ seems to be used as a reference by Richard. The British character makes assumptions about the political organization of the Igbos, based on his national experience. Similarly, he uses British history as a signpost and reference for the evolution of other cultures. Later in the narrative, Richard will observe,

‘I’ve been utterly fascinated by the bronzes since I first read about them. The details are stunning. It’s quite incredible that these people had perfected the complicated art of lost-wax casting during the time of the Viking raids. There is such marvellous complexity in the bronzes, just marvellous.’

‘You sound surprised’ Okeoma said.

‘What?’

‘You sound surprised, as if you never imagined *these people* capable of such things.’

(Adichie 111)

Richard seems to be exemplifying and embracing, perhaps even unconsciously, the Western narrative of progress. Richard cannot imagine that in a time in which the Western, European, civilization was still to achieve its supposedly civilized status, other cultures had been capable of artistic beauty and complexity. Indeed, “the construction of the colonial order is related to the elaboration of (...) forms of representation” as the “Western artistic (...) portrayal of the non-West,” in Said’s opinion, can be read as an “ideological distortion” (Mitchell 409). In Richard’s patronizing appreciation of the Igbo-Ukwu pots is an exemplification of Bahrani’s assertion that “archaeology, like other human sciences such as anthropology and history, allowed a European mapping of the subjugated Other” (160). Richard’s incredulousness in beholding the intricacy and beauty of the pots speaks of his reticence in recognizing in the Igbo artistic tradition not an antecedents to Western art, but a means of self-expression not to be limitedly defined as a necessary step toward the development of European art, as “the narrative of the progress of civilization was an invention of European imperialism, a way of constructing history in its own image and claiming precedence for Western culture” (Bahrani 171). In this context, the postcolonial interpretation of the Western’s reading of autochthonous artifacts cannot be separated from the postcolonial analysis of the ekphrastic passages. Bahrani fittingly observes that “postcolonial critiques have pointed to how the process of imperialism was not limited to the overt economic and political activities of Western governments in colonized lands. An entire system of classification through the arts and sciences was necessary for the success of the

imperial enterprise in the East and Africa” (160). It is this sort of cultural reflections which Richard’s appreciation exemplifies, as well as a kind of anachronistic interest which can be synthesized as primitivism, that is, the purely Western curiosity about “the different kinds of world, worlds that were characteristically through of as ‘savage’ or ‘barbaric’ or ‘primitive’” (Wood 152).

Therefore, as exemplified by the ekphrastic descriptions, Richard’s depiction, and his emotional investment with the Igbo-Ukwu pots cannot be identified as a simple expression of aesthetic appreciation. Richard’s gaze is invested and filtered by both a personal and national cultural entitlement and desire for assimilation and appropriation. This character’s fascination with the Nigerian autochthonous artifacts is a most fitting place to investigate the relations of power between the colonizer and colonized.

#### **Richard’s Gaze: *Abu m onye Biafra*<sup>4</sup>**

In order to analyze in all its implications the cultural dynamic exemplified by Richard’s gazing at and describing the Igbo artwork, dynamic which can be synthesized as the colonizer looking, with desire to possess both the artifacts and the culture they represent, at the colonizer’s means of self-expression, the continuation of the aforementioned passage must be cited. After visiting the Igbo-Ukwu site and observing the artifacts, Richard

thanked Pa Anozie and got up to leave. Pa Anozie said something and Emeka asked, “Papa is asking *will you not take photo of him?* All the white people that have come take photo.” Richard shook his head. “No, sorry. I haven’t brought a camera.” Emeka

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<sup>4</sup> “I am Biafran” (Adichie 181)

laughed, “*Papa is asking what kind of white man is this? Why did he come here and what is he doing?*”. (Adichie 72, emphasis added)

From his ekphrastic descriptions, Richard’s sins at this point in the narrative are his condescension and patronization of Igbo art, which is intertwined to his wonder and appreciation, and his unwillingness or inability, as portrayed in this passage, to document the artifacts. Relevant, for the purpose of this analysis, is the fact that in this exemplifying scene, Richard lacks the necessary tools to record the Igbo artifacts. The material lack of a camera here can be read, in the broader context of this novel, as Richard’s lacking the cultural instruments and rights to record a story and a culture which is not his own. As he is here unable to immortalize with a picture the Igbo artifacts, so Richard will never be able to write his novel, as his manuscripts will be either burnt, buried, or deserted. What is relevant to notice about Pa Anozie’s reaction to Richard’s not taking a picture of him or the pots is the fact that the role of the British character, as that of “all the white people,” seems to be instrumental to the demarginalization of Nigerian art and history. Richard is perceived by Pa Anozie, whose focus on how the white man perceives and validates the pots is a consequence of colonization, as a means through which Igbo culture and tradition can “speak” and be demarginalized; however, it is finally through Ugwu’s writing and re-claiming of his narrative that Igbo culture is demarginalized and re-centered.

The dominant culture, exemplified by Richard, is ambiguously presented, in this novel, as a mean through which the “subaltern” culture can speak up to a certain point in the narrative. For the moment, it is worth emphasizing that Richard himself seems to view his role as necessary for the demarginalization of autochthonous Igbo art and culture, as he conceives to write a book on it. It is rendered unambiguously, in the text, how Richard’s entitlement in telling a story which is

not his own is a fallacy. This is perhaps the most explicit, certainly literal, exemplification of how Spivak's observations can be employed in reading an ekphrastic passage. However, the complex cultural investigations on the backdrop of this novel do not allow for such an immediate reading, as Pa Anozie would have it. Other characters, amongst whom is the hybridlike European academic circle composed by Olanna, Odenigbo, and other academics, start to question Richard's involvement and role in depicting Igbo traditions, as well as his entitlement to a Nigerian cultural citizenship, what Hawley defines as "self-reflection" and "cultural expression" (qtd. in Akpome 145). An example of this reticence can be found in Ugwu, as "he could not comprehend *people that looked like Mr Richard taking away the things that belonged to people who looked like him*, Ugwu, for no reason at all" (Adichie 213, emphasis added). As aforementioned, the question ethnic identification and cultural belonging is at the core of *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Besides the already mentioned role of ethnicity in the explosion of intestine tensions leading to the Biafran secession, this novel aims to investigate also the individual's own sense of belonging to an "other" culture.

Intrinsic to Richard's appreciative gaze is his willingness to "appropriate and translate" Igbo culture and tradition, thus rendering his ekphrastic descriptions the most suitable place to investigate the issues of cultural appropriation and hybrid identity raised by this novel (Zulfiquar 101). As Akpome observes, "the most instructive indication that Adichie considers ethnicity as central to the definition of personal identity is the novel's representation of the British character, Richard. Richard comes to south-eastern Nigeria because of his fascination with antique Igbo-Ukwu art" as he progressively becomes, also through his romantic attachment to Kainene, even more "strongly drawn to Igbo culture" (154). Richard's willingness to assimilate Igbo culture, and belong to it, is explicit in the novel, as a starting point for Adichie's investigation of feelings

of entitlement and desire to be identified in an “other” culture. Richard’s feelings of belonging, exemplified by his attachment and willingness to re-mediate Igbo-Ukwu art, are exacerbated by the singular historical chronotope of *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Richard himself seems to tie political discourses regarding the Igbo ethnicity to its artistic heritage. After the beginning of the Igbo massacres, Richard takes it upon himself to write a lengthy article about what was currently happening in Nigeria, as he felt the international news coverage of the massacres to be both reductive and condescending. The chief point of interest, for my analysis, in Richard’s article is his mention of the Igbo-Ukwu site, and the discoveries made there. Discussing the tension between the South and North of Nigeria, Richard comments “the tribes of North and South have long had contact, at least as far back as the ninth century, as some of the magnificent beads discovered at the historic Igbo-Ukwu site attest” (Adichie 166). This passage reveals two central issues about how Richard both sees and translates Igbo art. Firstly, Richard feels entitled to denounce the massacre of Igbo people as an ‘insider’ by narrating their story and citing their cultural heritage. Secondly, Richard politicizes the Igbo artifacts in his coverage and condemnation of the events in Nigeria. His citing the Igbo-Ukwu site arguably serves the purpose of appealing to his European readership from a cultural standpoint, as if it is through culture that value could be assigned to the Igbo ethnicity. Moreover, it must be noticed that Richard is taking his European audience to a pre-colonization time, showing the contact which existed, and flourished as attested by the artifacts, before Britain’s “informal divide-and-rule policies” were established (Adichie 166).

Richard is very forthcoming, in the novel, about his desire to belong, and be recognized, as a Biafran. In this case the historical setting of the novel becomes fundamental, as it is in the division and secession that Richard finds the opportunity to acquire a sense of citizenship. The

very day the Biafran secession is proclaimed, Richard states, “he would be Biafran in a way he could never have been Nigerian—he was there at the beginning: he had shared in the birth. *He would belong*” (Adichie 167, emphasis added). Incidentally, Richard’s patriotism is tightly linked in the novel to his romantic attachment to Kainene, as attested by the fact that the very next words pronounced by him are “*marry me, Kainene*” (Adichie 167). This portrayal of romantically infused patriotism can be read as a typically European plot-device, thus appealing to the international readership Adichie is aiming to involve, making said readership more sympathetic. Richard’s desire to belong finds actual exemplification in his desire to write a novel about the findings at Igbo-Ukwu. The line separating aesthetic appreciation and desire for cultural appropriation are blurred in Richard’s character, as exemplified by the fact that he does not merely appreciate the Igbo artifacts, but wishes to re-mediate them in a book. The act of appropriation is intrinsic to the act of re-mediation.

### **Postcolonial Ekphrasis and the Novel**

Having thus established the implications of Richard’s appreciation of Igbo-Ukwu art, exemplified in his ekphrastic descriptions, in this section I will explore how the ekphrastic writing fits into, and expands, the postcolonial reading of the novel. What must be remembered is that Richard’s appreciation/appropriation is located in a specific historical moment, one in which it is fundamental to be ethnically identified, and that his desire to re-mediate the archaeological Igbo findings in a book is exemplifying also of his wish to acquire an Igbo cultural identity. In Richard is thus to be found an instance of cultural appropriation as a means of self-representation. In this case, the political discourse cannot be separated from the aesthetic

or artistic one, as Richard's desire for appropriation moves beyond the artifacts themselves, aiming to appropriate the culture they exemplify and represent.

In order to explore the postcolonial implications of Richard's gaze toward the Igbo artifacts, I must now return to Spivak's question, "can the subaltern speak?". In *Half of a Yellow Sun* the answer to this question might be more stratified than in Rushdie's novel. Adichie appears to try out different answers to the same question: who has the right to tell a story, in this case cultural and artistic, but which contains in itself a story of colonialism, dominance, and war. The most immediate answer to this question, in the novel, appears to be found in the postcolonial notion of hybridity. Several are the hybrid elements contained in this novel which might indicate this notion as the answer to Spivak's question, regarding both Richard and the text itself. A first instance to be noticed is the anglophone nature of the text itself. In what can be read as an instance of hybridity, Adichie employs and instrumentalizes the language of the colonizer in order to convey to the wider public a story about the political and economical, as well as cultural and personal, consequences of colonization. As cited above, although Britain can no longer be identified as a colonial center in concrete terms, the legacy of its past is still evident in the cultural, and linguistic domination which both Millais' print and Richard himself embody in these novels. Albeit predominantly anglophone, it must be noticed how this novel integrates traditional Igbo linguistic elements in its narrative, rendering the novel, thus, an example of linguistic hybridity. The Igbo language, however, is predominantly restricted to the expression of authenticity—emotions, familial, romantic, and communal affection and ties. As Cooper observes, "the insertion of indigenous languages (...) into the English novel serve the function of opening up the reader to the possibility of other concrete knowledges and worlds than the dominant European one" as a "symbol of an idealized and essentialized African pre-colonial

culture” (146). A second example of hybridity in the text is to be found in its form. Adichie employs the form and structure of the traditional Victorian novel in order to convey to, presumably, a Western reader, this story. In *Half of a Yellow Sun* many of the elements characterizing the traditional British, or European, novel can be found, which would be immediately recognizable to her intended readership, and with which it would feel comfortable. Notable instances of the employment of this structure are to be found in the novel’s polyphonic nature, romantic subplots, and interest in depicting the lives of those inhabiting the central households, comprising the servants and their rivalries. Even in this case, Adichie is appropriating the form, as the language, in an instance of mimicry, in order to make her story more ‘readable’ for a Western audience. While the frame, consisting of structure and language, of the novel instrumentalizes and appropriates Western models and means of expression, the content remains autochthonous. The Western model is thus instrumentalized by Adichie, in order to ‘translate’ and communicate her story. A last instance of hybridity in the text can be found in its characters. The academic élite depicted in the novel, for instance, comprising of Olanna, Odenigbo, Ezeka, and Okeoma, adopt an almost Western style in their gatherings and academic lifestyle.

The reading of hybridity as the answer to Spivak’s question in this novel appear, moreover, to be reinforced by the presence and role of Richard, specifically in relation to the Igbo-Ukwu artifacts. In this context, hybridity can be defined as able to provide “a way out of binary thinking, allow the inscription of the agency of the subaltern, and even permit a restructuring and destabilizing of power” (Prabhu 1). As mentioned above, Richard seeks to ‘appropriate and translate’ the Igbo artifacts, re-mediating them in his book. As Brenda Cooper observes, in the novel “Igbo material life begins to metamorphose into tropes of national pride”

and it is as such that they are regarded by Richard (133). In these terms, Richard is not only appropriating the representation of the Igbo cultural identity, but that identity itself. The tradition which the pots aim to exemplify in the text is accosted to a “tradition that has been communally forged and in this period of post-independence, white writing and education is part of the hybrid inheritance of Igbo artists and intellectuals in the novel represented by the Englishman, Richard” (Cooper 143-144). Explored in these terms, Richard’s role in the novel could be understood as necessary for the demarginalization of the “other” culture, or at least it is in these terms that he presents himself. Throughout the novel, as mentioned, passages of what the reader takes to be Richard’s book, influenced by the fact that they appear at the end of the chapters narrated from Richard’s perspective, appear. It is through these extracts that the context of the Biafran war is presented to the reader in a general sense, and not filtered through the consciousness of Olanna, Odenigbo, Richard, or Ugwu. Therefore, in appropriating a culture, a language, and an identity, Richard could be serving the purpose, in the novel, of demarginalizing them. In this case, Richard, portrayed throughout the novel in an ambiguous light regarding his pretension to belong, appears to present himself as necessary for the demarginalization of Igbo culture, as the means through which the marginalized culture can be ‘translated’ and re-mediated. As Nair notices in this regard, “Adichie, while upholding the need to preserve and maintain ethno-political Igbo identity, seems to argue in favour of the process of hybridity through the introduction of the ‘outsider’ character of Richard” (204). The notion of hybridity would then become central in the postcolonial reading of this novel, as in Richard coexist the dominant, British, cultural identity and his acquired Igbo one which, mingled, enable him to report what he is witnessing on an historical and represent the richness of the Igbo tradition, through his interest in the Igbo-Ukwu artifacts.

However, this apparently easily readable solution is complicated by Adichie in her investigation of cultural and ethnic identity, and who has the right to tell a story. As mentioned beforehand, Richard's entitlement in telling the story of both Biafra and the Igbo-Ukwu pots is questioned by, amongst others and quite relevantly, Ugwu. Ugwu wondered why "people who looked like Mr. Richard" felt like it was their role to 'speak' his autochthonous culture and history. In this context, it relevant to mention one of the readings which has been given to this novel. According to Mabura, *Half of a Yellow Sun* can be read as an instance of Gothic fiction. What is interesting for the purpose of my analysis is chiefly why she argues so. Mabura argues that "Gothic fiction tells tales of 'invasions,' which embody *transgressions* of all sorts, including those across national, social, sexual, and *identity boundaries*" (204, emphasis added). In this terms, Richard's desire for appropriation and re-mediation can be understood as both an "invasion" and as a "transgression," as Ugwu's remark exemplifies. Richard is effectively appropriating a narrative which is not his own, and arguably re-mediating it in his book. As mentioned earlier, the historical setting of this novel is particularly relevant as it informs the significance attributed and invested on the artifacts subjected to Richard's ekphrastic descriptions. As Mabura observes, Adichie engages, in this novel, in a process of "reclamation of her Igbo heritage, including Igbo-Ukwu art, language, and religion" (206). Such a process is underscored in *Half of a Yellow Sun* by the character of Richard Churchill. Richard learns Igbo against all odds and is nearly fluent. Richard's novel, intertextually fragmented and interwoven in the main narrative, is titled *In the Time of Roped Pots*. Apart from documenting the horrors of the Biafra war, the book celebrates Igbo-Ukwu art. (Mabura 215)

The fact that it is, at least apparently, through Richard's process of appropriation and translation of Igbo culture, that it is demarginalized would point toward Richard himself, in his acquired cultural hybridity, as the necessary means for the demarginalization of the subaltern culture.

However, the novel seems to resist such a reading. Throughout the narrative it is emphasized several times how Richard's cultural entitlement in narrating the events of the Biafran war is misplaced. It is only at the very end of the novel that an alternative is presented to the reader. In the very last pages of the text, Ugwu asks Richard "are you still writing your book, sah?" to which Richard replies, "the war isn't my story to tell, really" (Adichie 425). In the end, thus, Richard relinquishes his entitlement at narrating and 'speaking' the Igbo culture and persecution. It must thus be emphasized that Ugwu "took the sheets of paper from Mr Richard," effectively accepting and taking on his role as the narrator of his own story (Adichie 425). In light of this, it can be claimed that the 'subaltern' reacquires and reclaims his narrative. In this narrative twist can be found an exemplification of Spivak's aforementioned assertions. Spivak had observed that "the oppressed, if given the chance (...) can speak and know their conditions" (25). Two apparently correlated and significant events take place at the end of the novel. On one hand, Richard finally recognizes and acknowledges that he can neither fully belong to Nigeria, nor tell and write its story, both political and artistic. Richard's recognition of the impossibility of his belonging to the "other" culture is also informed by the disappearance of Kainene, the affective bond tying him to Nigeria. More significantly, as Richard recognizes the limitations of his cultural entitlement, Ugwu re-claims his own narrative, effectively speaking his condition through his novel.

## 5. Conclusions

Both Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* offer exemplification of how ekphrasis can be analyzed, in postcolonial novels, as a feature broadening the understanding of the text and, specifically, of the dynamics regulating the relation between the colonized and the colonizer. As I have shown, the analysis of the descriptions of visual forms of art in a novel can offer an interdisciplinary opportunity, useful in furthering the reader's understanding of the text itself. In both these novels, the analysis of the dynamics involved in the ekphrastic descriptions of works of art, in both cases invested of cultural and national significance, has broadened the postcolonial reading and discourse regarding the text. In concluding this thesis, I want to reiterate the fact that from Classical literature onwards, ekphrasis has been employed, as a poetic device, almost exclusively by Western authors. The choice by currently well-respected and internationally established authors such as Adichie and Rushdie to instrumentalize a primarily and historically 'western' device is in itself worth analyzing. Furthermore, in both these cases, the ekphrastic writing is employed as a tool by the authors, who, through it, are able to present the cultural relations between the previously colonized and the still present legacy of colonization. I have explored how the works of art presented in these novels are able to depict the dynamics of power existing in very specific contexts: the immediate afterwards of Indian independence, and the Biafran secession.

In both cases, as I have shown, the discourse animating the ekphrastic descriptions is one which sees, as its interlocutors, on one side the previously colonized and marginalized, and on the other the previous colonizing and dominant culture. In the ekphrastic passages contained in both novels, the reader can observe the dominant culture and the previously colonized, the

‘subaltern’ one, engaging with each other. In this context, I believe worth noticing the fact that, albeit England did not exercise any form of direct political dominance on its previous colonies, Nigeria and India, the legacy of its past domination is still culturally evident in both contexts, as exemplified by the fact that the print of the Raleigh painting is hanging on Saleem’s bedroom wall, and by Richard’s presence in Nigeria. Both ekphrastic passages show the way in which the previously dominant and the previously marginalized relate to each other, how they are still part of each other’s narrative. The analysis of the ekphrastic descriptions also shows how the previously colonized culture is able to demarginalized itself and reclaim its own narrative.

In Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, as I have explored, the marginalized, Saleem, observes and describes Millais’s imperialistically connoted painting, recognizing in it England’s grand narrative of empire and colonization. Relevantly, Saleem instinctually does not recognize himself in the titular character of the painting, the young Raleigh, who, inspired by the fisherman’s tale, will embark on his own exploratory and colonial endeavors. Saleem recognizes himself in the other youth, the nameless one, the one not richly dressed, the one who will not be part of that grand narrative of conquest. Still, the young Indian boy has to insert himself in the painting, find an echo of his own identity in it, albeit in an anonymous youth, in order to present himself.

On the other hand, in Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun*, an opposite dynamic is at play. In this novel it is Richard, representative of the dominant, previously colonizing culture, which ambiguously gazes at the artifacts exemplifying the Igbo culture and tradition. Richard is ambiguously positioned in the novel, driven by his aesthetic appreciation, underneath which lies his desire for the assimilation of the “other,” subaltern culture, which he describes in patronizing terms. Richard presents himself to the reader as the necessary means through which the

marginalized culture can ‘speak’ and be re-mediated. However, it is explicitly presented in the text how Richard’s presumption and entitlement is the fallacy to be found in the colonizer’s siding, with patronization and condescension, with the colonized. Richard believes it his place to re-mediate, and therefore appropriate, Igbo culture. It is only on the very last pages of the novel that Richard finally recognizes that the war, and the culture it concerned, was not his story to tell, and that the reader realizes that the passages extracted from “The World Was Silent When We Died,” presented in the novel, had actually Ugwu as their author.

Therefore, in both texts, the analysis of the ekphrastic passages is able to broaden the postcolonial reading of the novel, effectively exemplifying the cultural dynamics regulating the relation between the colonized and the colonizer, in the aftermath of independence.

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