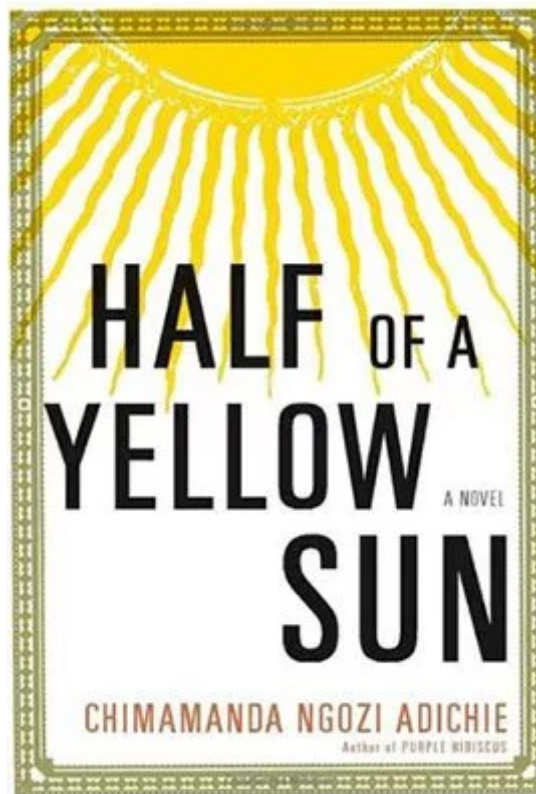


## Popular culture can enhance our understanding of development

*What role can popular culture play in the academic study of development? A new book addresses this very question.*

Have you ever considered what Nollywood films or the book *Half of a Yellow Sun* could teach you about development? Quite a lot, apparently. That's according to a new book entitled *Popular representations of Developments: Insights from novels, films, television and social media*.

Academic programmes of development tend to centre on economics-focused research studies and policy documents, but the editors of this volume believe that popular culture can illuminate the study of development by providing “the concrete historical yet human experiences out of which societies are invariably composed”.



The book, which was edited by David Lewis, Dennis Rodgers and Michael Woodcock, contains a series of essays looking at how literature and fiction, media and television, film, public campaigns and new media can enrich the study of development.

In the article, however, we will consider just two of those: fiction and public campaigns.

### Literature and Fiction

*“Fiction is arguably to a large extent frequently about the very issues that at a basic level are the subject matter of development studies: the promises and perils of encounters between different peoples; the tragic mix of courage, desperation, humour and deprivation characterising the lives of the downtrodden; and the complex assortment of means, motives and opportunities surrounding efforts by outsiders to ‘help’ them.”*

The quote above, taken from chapter two of the book, emphasises the thin line that exists between literature and the social sciences. This is because storytelling is “considered historically as one of humankind’s oldest methods of possessing information and representing reality”. In fact,

many writers use factual events for their novels and many social scientists use fictitious reality to illustrate their theses. Historically, the role of literature has been not only “to delight”, but also “to teach”.

By comparing and contrasting literary views on development with the ideas and perceptions of academic social science and the public policy world, one can glean new insights and novel perspectives. In 2002, researcher Timothy Mitchell conducted a study into how the World Bank interpreted Egypt’s development predicament. Mitchell underlines how official World Bank documents portrayed this dilemma as a function of demographic and geographic factors – too many people producing too little food because of not enough arable land – and how this in turn gave rise to a corresponding policy focus on agricultural and irrigation projects.

However, literary authors such as the Nobel Prize winner Naguib Mahfouz, in his novels *Adrift on the Nile* and *The Journey of Ibn Fattouma* or Ahdad Soueif in her Booker Prize-nominated novel *The Map of Love* provided very different analyses. They respectively pointed to factors including modernisation and the simultaneous spread of anomie, religious fundamentalism and the colonial legacy as critical to explaining Egypt’s contemporary predicament. Mitchell’s work strongly supported these analyses as key factors to understanding the country’s current development. This example is not to suggest that novelists should be considered the authority on development issues, rather to emphasise that their work should be taken more seriously.

John Harriss, a Professor of International Studies at Simon Fraser University, makes good use of novels in his undergraduate teaching. In chapter three of the book, he describes how he has paired books by social scientists and historians with works of fiction in his International Studies undergraduate class at Simon Fraser University. One of those pairings is *Imagined Communities: The Origins and Spread of Nationalism* by Benedict Anderson and *Half of a Yellow Sun* by the accomplished Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. This novel is about the experience of life in an African colony in the immediate aftermath of colonialism, and then in the context of state failure and civil war. In the book, Adichie, who describes herself as a writer of realist fiction, makes her readers witness to the “everyday dramas of race, gender and status distinctions in the post-colonial society of Nigeria”.

The idea of race and nation is debated within the book; with one character Professor Ezeka saying, “you only became aware that you were Igbo because of the white man. The pan-Igbo idea came only in the face of white domination. You must see that tribe as it is today is as colonial a product as nation and race.” This evokes the idea of “imagined communities” as described by Anderson in his book.

Adichie also takes her readers in the world that Anderson describes as the colonial intelligentsia created by the “educational and administrative pilgrimages” brought about by colonialism. It is imagined through the language of English through which individuals from different tribes in Nigeria communicate. Anderson uses the example of Ghana to argue that “nothing suggests that Ghanaian nationalism is any less real...because its national language is English rather than Ashanti”. Ultimately, he contends that “print-language is what invents nationalism, not a particular language per se”.

## Public Campaigns

Some **charity media campaigns have been criticised** because of the way development issues are portrayed. In chapter nine of this book, Uma Kothari shows that many of the popular images used in campaigns today are not completely new, but part of an historical legacy.

Kothari does this by analysing the Empire Marketing Board (EMB) poster campaign from 1926 to 1933 which highlighted issues of development through its visual representation of colonised people and places.

This was the British government's first peacetime propaganda campaign and it emerged out of a campaign to promote "imperial preference without tariffs". Although the primary goal of the campaign was to advertise Empire goods, the EMB had a secondary purpose of selling the idea of Empire.

This meant that many advertisements promoting a particular product from the Empire included information about the good or the colony from which it came as well as a few statistics. One researcher even described it as "a series of geography lessons, a patriotic pageant and an economic spectacle all rolled into one".

The underlying message was the evolution of the idea of Empire from domination over vast collection of lands to a single family of diverse and yet united people. Despite this, the posters continued to portray a hierarchical imperial system and reproduce paternalist and unequal relationships between coloniser and colonised.

The creators of the campaign were also keen to project a more modern vision of Empire, one that explicitly invoked a language of care and responsibility towards imperial subjects. As a result, many posters intertwined the promotion of economic trade with ideas about development, humanitarianism and a 'civilising' mission.

These representations were based on the belief that Britain was a pioneering nation that had built an advanced human culture and a model of civilisation. As a result of this great belief in the superiority of British culture and economy, emphasis was placed on Britain's role as the Empire's enabler. Referring to the achievements of the EMB's work abroad, Stephen Tallents, Director of the EMB, commented that "every colonial civil servant knows how much could and should be done in helping backward peoples to learn new and more scientific ways of rearing their children, tilling their soil and improving their health".

These ideas can be seen clearly in some of the posters of the *Colonial Progress Brings Home Prosperity* series. In one photo, **East African Transport – Old Style** (follow link to see image), African women and children are seen transporting goods on their backs across the countryside. In another photo, **East African Transport – New Style**, see below, it shows the "progress" which has been brought by the white man, who supervises transporting goods in large canoes with a bridge and trucks, symbols of modernity and technology.



These posters hint at the need for Britain to help those in the colonies learn new ways of exploiting their natural resources. The posters also depict industrious colonial workers, ignorant of the

necessary skills, expertise and technology to develop. This helped to justify imperial intervention by Britain sharing its modern industrial experience.

These posters also presented racialised imagery that fostered belief in white supremacy. In the East African transport poster series discussed earlier, we see examples of “dehumanised imperial subjects whose physical features are often ‘hidden or exaggerated beyond individual recognition’ whereas ‘white citizens were represented with distinct personal features as well as good posture, strength and delicacy’.”

Although the posters did present ideas about the role of the British public in developing the colonies, “the colonies were prevented from developing their own economies by a combination of the effects of the open door tariff policy imposed by Britain, of a prohibition of assistance to industries which might compete with British exports and of a policy of trusteeship which portrayed the native at best as a child, at worst as a barbarian.”

In concluding her chapter, Kothari points out that while it may be easy to criticise or condemn these racialised and hierarchical portrayals, it is important to consider the historical, economic and cultural context in which they were produced. However, engaging with historical material such as the EMB campaign, can help us explore the legacy of present-day ideas.

## **Popular Representations of Development: Insights from novels, films, television and social media Edited by David Lewis, Dennis Rodgers and Michael Woolcock**

**Published by Routledge ISBN 978-0415-82281-7**

---

June 9th, 2014 | [Arts/Culture, Development](#) | [0 Comments](#)

---

☺