

“[S]tripping Our Humanity from us”: Trauma, Women and War in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun*

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Abstract

In Postcolonial times, African nations especially Nigeria has always been a hotbed for conflicts and struggles over territorial supremacy between the three ethnic religious groups Igbo, Yoruba and the Hausa-Fulani . The most terrible of them was the secessionist movement of the Igbos from Nigeria to form the Republic of Biafra, also known as the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970). The Biafran War is notorious for the inhuman slaughter of thousands of civilians due to war, starvation and disease. It has been a raw memory for many Nigerian intellectuals and writers such as Chinua Achebe, Flora Nwapa and others who have portrayed in their works, the devastating war and its psychological and social effects on the native population. These literary representations have only generalized the impact of the war on the women, seen either in relation to their male counterparts or as conduits for the transfer of political or personal gains for men. However, third generation Nigerian writers such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie have situated women in the traumatic national history of the nation and explored how they negotiate the spaces of war-conflicted nation and the domestic personal space in their novels. The paper attempts to explore Adichie’s Orange Prize winning novel “Half of An Yellow Sun” to establish gender as a form of marginality in the context of the war by showing the various atrocities committed against women as well as their struggles for identity in a predominantly patriarchal society. Such a study is important especially in the context of Adieche’s growing global popularity and the immediacy of the context of her narrative.

Keywords: Postcolonial African Literature, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie , War Narrative, Half of a Yellow Sun

Introduction

The African continent has always been a hotbed for conflicts over natural resources such as petroleum, valuable minerals and timber since the colonial times. This has resulted in repeated violent skirmishes and bloody conflicts amongst the native population and the imperial forces. Even after the independence of the African nations from the imperial forces in the nineteenth-century, the nations have not been able to escape their turbulent fate. This violence is seen especially in Nigeria which has witnessed one of the worst humanitarian crises in the history of the world-The Biafran War. The Biafran War had an overwhelming effect-both collective on the nation and personal on the citizens. It has become an eye-opener to the fact that postcolonial nations have not been able to escape colonial influence either residual in the form of cartographic limitations and other interventions in their socio-economic-political life in the past for their

administrative convenience or direct interventions even in the postcolonial times for the protection of their own economic interests in the region.

Historical Context of the Crisis

The Biafran crisis has its roots in the history of the nation. The territory of Nigeria came under the colonial rule of Britain in late nineteenth-century and became a British colony in 1914. Under the newly declared country, three distinct ethnic groups were grouped into one nation for administrative convenience without any regard to their prior hostility and irreconcilable differences - Igbo in the south-east, Hausa-Fulani in the north and Yoruba in the south-west. After the independence from Britain in 1960s, real conflict began amongst the three communities owing to their cultural and ethnic differences. The Hausa Fulani in the north were followers of Islam religion and prosperous merchants while the Yorubas and Igbos were mainly simple rural peasant folk. This contradiction led to the large scale migration of these communities to the north in search of job opportunities. In 1966, a group of Igbo army majors attempted a coup and several political leaders from the other two communities were killed. The Igbo General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi was proclaimed the president. This coup was perceived as an Igbo conspiracy and the panic led to further riots and massacres where the Igbos were wantonly slaughtered. The situation was further deteriorated by a counter-coup by Hausa-Fulani where Ironsi was assassinated and Lieutenant colonel Yakubu Gowon came into power with the support of the Britain and America. Along with this, the massacre of Christian Igbo soldiers in the north brought about an exodus of the Igbos out of northern Nigeria. All efforts at peace failed miserably. In 1967, Lieutenant colonel Odumegwa Ojukwa declared the secession of the South east of Nigeria as the Igbo nation- the Republic of Biafra. The flag of the nation with a half-arising sun with eleven rays for the eleven provinces denoted a new dawn for the Igbos. The Nigerian federal government did not recognize this and the Nigerian civil war began in July 1967. The federal government received enormous aid from the western superpowers and totally crushed the rebellion. All linkages of Biafra with the outside world were sealed off and this led to a great shortage of food and other essential goods in the region. About three million people died from starvation and other related diseases in the area and Biafra was eventually forced to surrender to the Nigerian army in 1970.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and the Third generation of Nigerian writing

The Biafran War has strongly captured the literary imagination of writers and intellectuals alike in Nigeria. For them, the Biafran conflict acted as a formative influence on both their personal lives and creative imaginations. Literary stalwarts in Nigeria like Chinua Achebe, Buchi Emecheta and Flora Nwapa have represented various facets of the crisis in their works *Girls at War and Other Stories* (1973), *Destination Biafra* (1982) and *Never Again* (1976)

respectively. The latest among them is Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie who has received global recognition and prestige owing to her novels and short stories which depict the still ongoing effects of colonization in the daily life of the Nigerians. Born in 1977 in Nigeria and later educated at the university town of Nsukka (which later became the setting for *Half a Yellow Sun*), her first novel *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) received the Orange Prize for Fiction in 2004 and the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best first Book in 2005 for its depiction of colonization and male violence. Her second novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) explores the situation in Nigeria leading up to the Biafran crisis and its effect both on the individual and the nation. Besides this, her literary oeuvre also consists of a collection of short stories *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009) and a novel *Americanah* (2013).

Adichie belongs to the third generation of Nigerian writers along with Chris Abani and Sefi Atta who have returned to their nation's bloody past time and again, to discuss its still ongoing effects on the population. But Adichie here, has to be credited for presenting the coalescence of the personal and the public in times of war and for highlighting the struggle of women to establish their own identities and political and ideological positions in a society dominated by men. In this Adichie follows the legacy of writers like Buchi Emecheta and Flora Nwapa who, "have used the topic of civil war to engage in a gender war" (Page 233) to describe the horrors faced by women in wartimes, but Adichie's uniqueness lies in the diverse and well defined female characters that she has etched in the novel.

Half of a Yellow Sun (2006) follows the fortunes of twin sisters Olanna and Kainene along with their lovers Odenigbo, a university professor and an intellectual with revolutionary ideas and Richard, a British journalist-writer as they move from their secured middle-class prosperity during the 1960s before the war to uncertainty and insecurity during and after the war. The impact of the war is the most profound on Ugwu, the underfed, impoverished houseboy of Odenigbo's household, who puts on several roles like that of a teacher, a child soldier sustaining serious physical injuries and mental trauma and later the writer of the Book within the novel. The characters are forced to flee their peaceful intellectual life in Nsukka and face the threats of starvation, air raids and uncertainty in the refugee town of Umuahia.

Pius Adesanmi and Chris Dunton in their essay, "Nigeria's Third Generation Writing: Historiography and Preliminary Theoretical Considerations"(2015) discuss the features of the writing of these authors such as an urban setting, and emphasis on the "deprivation, the denial of individual human rights and aspirations, the degradation of social relations under a series of increasingly despotic and corrupt regimes"(11). *Half of a Yellow Sun* depicts all the above in the background of the terrible violence of the civil war beginning from the university town of Nsukka and gradually following the principle characters as they move from places such as Abba, Umuahia and Orlu as the violence intensifies. The frequent use of "the trope of incarceration and

the aesthetics of trauma” (Adesanmi and Dunton 17) is another feature of the writing of the third generation writers. Needless to say this trauma and violence of war is not accessible to the writers themselves, who were born much later. But the memories of the trauma continue to haunt them, through family reminiscences of personal trauma. Adichie herself, recounts, “I was aware of how this war haunted my family.” (‘Africa, “Authenticity” and the Biafran Experience’ 50). Thus, the novel is for Adichie a form of coping up with the pale gloom of the trauma in her family. The fact that it is as much a personal emotional response as well a general exploration of the war, is reflected in the final words of the novel, “May we always remember”(Author’s Note). John Marx refers how the romantic turmoil of the novel’s primary couple Odenigbo and Olanna is both mirrored and punctuated by the crisis of the state (619). In the novel, trauma operates in two ways, the trauma of the author created by ‘Postmemory’ (Hirsch 2008), which “creates where it cannot recover. It imagines what we cannot recall.” (Past Lies:Post Memories in Exile 422). And the trauma faced by the principle characters in their own ways: Olanna , Richard and Ugwu.

Women in times of War

The novel explores the situation of war in all its immediacy and horror through the literary imagination and superb craftsmanship of Adichie. The author herself declares the work as a testimony to, “how powerfully we can love; how easily we can kill; how human we can be when a war dedicates itself to stripping our humanity from us” (blurb). Adichie explores the major themes of war narratives in her novel like child soldiering, the extreme inhumanity and gross exploitation of human rights etc .The universality of war and the destruction in its aftermath is well reflected in the several poignant instances such as the mother fleeing from northern Nigeria carrying the decapitated head of her daughter in a calabash which the author connects with “the German women who fled Hamburg with the charred bodies of their children stuffed in suitcases, the Rwandan women who pocketed tiny parts of their mauled children” (HYS 82)

The narrative also shows the failure of the earlier bonds of friendship, humanity and love in the face of war. Everyone is suspicious of each other and is desperate to survive. Thus, Mohammed Ali who was earlier a family friend of Uncle Mbaezi and Aunt Ifeka , does not hesitate to kill the family including their pregnant daughter Arize due to their Igbo lineage. This profoundly affects Olanna who is both physically and psychologically numbed by the episode. Not only are her legs paralyzed, she suffers from panic attacks and struggles to breathe. She has difficulty even in forming words and in expressing the horrible episode. Even later in the narrative, the incident haunts her through flashbacks and continues to interrupt her life in the present. Much later, when she is able to narrate the events in all their vividness to Ogburn, she accepts their eventuality, “It was often difficult to visualize anything concrete that was not dulled

by memories of Arize and Auntie Ifeka and Uncle Mbaezi that did not feel like being lived on suspended trauma.” (HYS 185)

Richard, Kainene’s British lover who comes to Nigeria to write a book about the Igbo-Ukwu art, is similarly shocked when the custom officer, Nnaemeka with whom he was speaking, is shot dead. The reality of the scene shocks him to such an extent that he “wished that he would lose his mind or that his memory would suppress itself.” (165). He feels he should be more affected and takes up writing to express the horror suitably. But writing in the newspaper, does not give him the expected cathartic relief and only brings back the pain. For Richard, a mild and sensitive man wanting the love, recognition and acceptance that he never received in his childhood, the events of the war completely shocks him to the core. Kaneine’s disappearance at the end of the novel completely breaks him down when he realizes that “his life would always be like a candlelit room; he would see things only in the shadow, only in half glimpses.” (HYS 430)

But the one on whom the impact of the war is most profound is Ugwu. Ugwu begins his journey in the novel as an illiterate rural boy who comes from the village to work as a servant in the household of Odenigbo. The narrative follows him as he, takes a conscious interest in the events of the war and records his observations in the narrative. During the crisis, he works as a teacher with Olanna and is later conscripted into the army. The army and its violent ways completely numbs and transforms Ugwu. He finds himself both in the role of victim and perpetrator when he along with a group of fellow soldiers rapes a girl which gives him a kind of “self-loathing release” (HYS 365). He dissociates himself from the act but it leaves an indelible impression on him. John Marx notes, “Ugwu is not in charge of his own development. The memory of the rape helps make Ugwu into a writer. He writes in order to repress.” (Marx 619)

Adichie suitably portrays the vulnerability and powerlessness of the women and children in the traumatic national history, who are otherwise, subsumed under the meta-narratives of patriarchy and the male perpetuated war and its devastation. She imagines gender as a form of marginality along with race in the postcolonial African nations. Florence Stratton’s *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender* (1994) speaks about the dominance of the ‘mother Africa trope’ in African literature, where the experience of women are “trivialized and distorted” (52) and they are forced to “bear the [male] writer’s interpretation of history, just as she might bear his baby.”(52) This recounts Elleke Boehmer’s assertion that in postcolonial nationalist history, women are often peripheral and invisible in contrast to their prominent male counterparts who take up more proactive roles. This is more exacerbated in times of war, when women bodies act as conduits for the transfer of power and authority among men. In most war narratives, we find the perpetual absence of women, limited only in the background as mute sufferers in the war. But Adieche creates several women from diverse socio-economic and ideological positions who have their own individual responses and accordingly negotiate with the

crisis. Their intervention thus, not only attempts to redact their role in history but articulates their own endeavor for self identity.

In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, we have the twin sisters Olanna and Kainene, daughters of the influential yet corrupt businessman, Ozobia. Ozobia shapes his daughters according to his own status, with western education in Nigeria and later sending them to the university in England for further studies. The name of the daughters reveals the role they are expected to fulfill in his household. So while Olanna whose names means “God’s gold” (HYS 58) is supposed to bring material wealth and good fortune in the household, Kainene which means “Let’s watch and see what next God will bring.” (HYS 58), shows an expectation for the greater things of life. So where the “illogically pretty” (HYS 49) Olanna is bargained in exchange for a business contract, Kainene who has “an excellent eye for business” (31) is expected to fulfill a son’s duty of attending to the business. Kainene is thus depicted as an androgynous being with an “excellent eye for business” (HYS 31). In fact, her rare insight and sharp-wittedness about business makes her a worthy successor to her father, who delightfully declares, that she “is not just like a son, she is like two” (HYS 31). Their relationship with their father is analogous to their relationship with the nation, where they are valued only in terms of their utility to the father figure albeit the male patriarchal guardians of the nation. Yet, both the sisters have formed their own independent ideological positions irrespective of their father. Hence, when the war broke out, Ozobia flees with his wife to England, returning only when peace is resumed while Olanne and Kainene refuse to desert their nation. Thus, during the war, Olanne and Ugwu teach young children in a refugee camp while Kainene runs a refugee camp and school. Yet the situation is far from being idealistic and positive for the plight of the common man and especially for the women. The new leader and architect of the Biafran Republic, Ojukwo is accused by Kainene of coveting the wives of the other Nigerian men. The fear of male dominance, of rape and sexual molestation looms throughout the narrative. Vulnerable young women like Eberechi are traded with relief workers and Biafran soldiers and officials in exchange for the employment of male members of the household or for relief help and Ugwu witnesses the steady influx of the young girls entering into the commander’s compound.

The outside world is even more horrible where women of both communities, are raped by groups of soldiers. The aggression of the war incites young soldiers like Ugwu to participate in the bestiality of war. The rape of a young woman by a gang of soldiers including Ugwu is vividly described in its monstrosity. It is not an isolated situation as Ugwu’s own sister Anulika is similarly raped by five men. Even women in the refugee camp is not free from the dominance of the lusty religious heads like Father Marcel, who rapes the girls at the refugee camp, even impregnating one of them.

Conclusion

In times of national crisis, it is the women and young children who have to pay the price of the male aggression for territorial dominance and superiority over each other. The novel abounds with examples of women sacrificing their dignity and integrity at the hands of men, both within and outside the family. Adichie thus, can be credited for the creation of strong female characters who willfully contest and eventually transgress such limitations imposed upon them by patriarchy. Such a novel, thus is not only limited to presentation of war but also gives a central importance to the condition and the role that women play during the war.

Notes

1. Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Half of a Yellow Sun*. London: Fourth Estate, 2009.

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