

WARRING IDENTITIES: METAPHOR OF WAR IN CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S: *HALF OF A YELLOW SUN*

Thahiya Afzal*

Abstract: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of A Yellow Sun* explores themes of identity amidst the explosive atmosphere of the Biafran war. Adichie uses language to draw the reader into the middle-class clique centred on the University of Nsukka which provides the core characters of her book. Their infidelities, their inconsistencies, their desire, despite the servants, for equality and freedom are symptomatic of their time. The narrative becomes a vehicle to explore parallel and different lives, providing contrast and metaphor, stories to undulatingly unfold the vagaries of war.

Keywords: Identity, metaphor of war, relationships, Society, history.

In the words of Gabriel García Márquez “The worst enemy of politicians is a writer”. Writers feel consciously driven to record and examine what transpires around them. In fact they owe it to themselves and the times they are a part of. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of A Yellow Sun* is a graceful evocation of a forgotten time and place during the Biafran war. It explores the accurate historical and political account of the Nigerian- Biafran war. The novel is set in the 1960s and it constructs the collective consciousness of war. The Chicago Tribune observed that, “A novel that [uses] fiction to its best advantage, telling the stories of ordinary people... – ineluctably caught in savage circumstances of chaos, breakdown and violence... what Adichie's novel offers is a compassionate, compelling look at the nearly unfathomable immediacy of war's effect on people.” (i)

In the telling of this painful experience with effortless grace, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie illuminates a seminal moment in modern African history: Adichie believes that you cannot but avoid the truth and as always truth will hurt and sometimes badly so. Truth, some of the scenes are so graphically described that the reader has to close the book and take a deep breath before continuing. She captures Biafra's impassioned struggle to establish itself as an independent republic in Southeastern Nigeria during the late 1960s. The experience of this tumultuous decade is presented alongside five unforgettable characters: Ugwu, a thirteen-year-old houseboy who works for Odenigbo, a university professor full of revolutionary zeal; Olanna, the professor's beautiful young mistress who has abandoned her life in Lagos for a dusty town and her lover's charm; and Richard, a shy young Englishman infatuated with Olanna's willful twin sister Kainene. *Half of a Yellow Sun* is a tremendously evocative novel of the promise, hope, and disappointment of the Biafran war.

* Assistant Professor Senior, Department of English, School of Social Sciences and Languages, VIT University, Vellore, India. Email: thahiyaafzal@vit.ac.in

The Nigerian- Biafran war also called the Nigerian Civil war happened between 1967 and 1970. The conflict of war was because of the ethnic and political tensions between the different people of Nigeria. One of the causes of war was British Colonialism. The movement towards war started around 1960 when Nigeria got independence from British colonialism; few years later a coup d'état led by Igbo tribe through the country open to unrest. Since Nigeria as a country has many clans ethnic tension started to sparkle between Muslim Hausa and Christian Igbo clans and eventually resulted with ethnic cleansing of Igbos that were living in the north of the country with Muslim majority. Because of that atrocity the Igbo clan proclaimed independence of their own, and established a country named after Biafran Bay in the southeast of Nigeria. Few countries recognized the new country, however the most powerful ones (i.e., United Kingdom and Soviet Union) supported Nigeria with military supplies and after three years (1967-1970) the war of Biafra secession ended in a humanitarian catastrophe as Nigerian blockades stopped all supplies, military and civilian alike, from entering the region. Hundreds of thousands (perhaps millions) people died in the resulting famine.

The story has been told through the lives of three very different people: Ugwu, a 13 year old boy from some remote village who is starting to work as a houseboy in the house of university professor with revolutionary aspirations. Ugwu is a magnificent source of Nigerian (African) folklore and mythology. His superstitious-ness is beautiful, pure and incredibly authentic. Being uneducated his provincialism and thinking of everything authentically African as inferior comparing with everything British is very strong. Olanna is a young woman with a university diploma from London and a member of Nigerian aristocracy who rejects the privileged life to follow her heart. As a strong, modern, enthusiastic woman with strong vision of her future life she has liberated herself from the chains of her family's expectations. Richard, is an Englishman who has come in Nigeria because he fell in love with the ancient piece of local art. A Man who as a white man has to prove himself as a true Biafran.

What I especially significant is that all three main characters are real humans; they are not flawless. On the contrary, they all make terrible mistakes some of which might be even unforgivable under different circumstances proving "To err is Human".

Half of a Yellow Sun (Biafran flag) is a story about birth and short life of Biafra, life that ended in one of the worst possible ways while "the world was silent when they died". Biafra becomes a synonym for starvation, for hunger, misery, children with huge bellies and limbs like toothpicks, "kwashiorkor". But this is not only story about the war. War with its horror is scenery for the story of love, loyalty, friendship, betrayal, forgiveness about fight and survival. It is very universal story placed in one precise historical context.

The book's sections alternate between the early and late 1960s, the latter period in Nigeria during the Biafran War. And as the characters live through the war, and their lives and their natures, and along with them their country, are transformed by it. Perhaps even their own identity is redrawn, especially once the promise of a recognised nationality is promised and then denied. Eventually there are vivid scenes of the war's brutality, its double standards, its compromises, its cynicism, its racism and its starvation. The images are graphic and vivid, unforgettable even, and the ability of war to undermine utterly and profoundly any assumption that an individual might harbour about an imagined future is movingly portrayed.

Identity and the shifting sense of self is another duality that Adichie explores. Identity is both private and public - what you tell your neighbors is different from what you tell your parents or your spouse or your children, which is again in a manner different from what you think about yourself. On top of personal identity, there is tribal allegiance, political affiliation, or national. Of course the nation itself is a creation of British imperialism, but the intellectuals of Nigeria debate whether there is such a thing as 'black' which is more than 'not-white', as there are so many other identities out there - and in all of these different tribal/ethnic groups but still there is enough difference in the distribution and use of power that one resents and fears the other.

In the novel *Half of a Yellow Sun*, one of the protagonists Odenigbo states "The white man brought racism into the world." (253) The British simply drew lines on the map in order to create political entities while colonizing Africa. When the map of Nigeria was drawn, two different ethnic groups – Hausa and Igbo were put together. The predominant differences among them were Hausa who were largely Muslims followed feudalism whereas Igbo mainly Christians pursued a democratic society. After the independence of Nigeria in 1960, the conflict between Hausa and Igbo became crucial to their identities. The fights led the Igbos to secede from Nigeria and form a new country called Biafra. As a result the war took place in order to prevent the secession and to add the region back into the country of Nigeria. The Biafrans suffered from hunger and starvation and claimed that Nigeria was using hunger and genocide to win the war. In the end, Nigeria won the war and retained its stature as a unified nation but still the ethnic groups do not identify with each other.

Adichie's account on the Nigerian civil war is to remind people of their own past history and the significance of their tragedy. In the article "No Humanity in War: Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*", Umelo Ojinmah has recounted what Achebe has stated in the preface to *Morning Yet on Creation Day* that: "...in our situation the greater danger lies not in remembering but in forgetting... I believe that if we are to survive as a nation we need to grasp the meaning of our tragedy. One way to do it is to remind ourselves constantly of the things that happened and how we felt when they were happening." (xiii) (2) The title, *Half of a Yellow Sun*

suggests that Biafra's rising sun has set for ever which indicates that Biafra's hope for the glorious future as an independent country has set for ever.

Half of a Yellow Sun goes back and forth between pre-war (The Early Sixties) and post-war (The Late Sixties). The novel gives a detailed account of the war through the experience of its five main characters: the twin sisters Olanna and Kainene, their spouses Odenigbo and Richard, and Ugwu, Odenigbo's houseboy. The story presents the lives of Odenigbo and Olanna belonging to the rational community at Nsukka. Odenigbo is the strong advocator of Biafra secession along with Chief Ojukwu. Odenigbo remarks that '...the only authentic identity for the African is the tribe', and that 'I am Nigerian because a white man created Nigeria and gave me that identity . . . but I was Igbo before the white man came.' (11) The discourse of independent Biafra is brought out through the debates of this academic community.

Adichie foregrounds the violence of war through the suffering of the characters in their day-to-day existence. Violence, says Césaire in *Discourse on Colonialism*, a tool that is used by the colonizer to repress and control the colonized. (9) Colonial rule is carried out through the force of violence which was often cruel and uncompromising. Violence exercises power and exhibits the means of subjection. In this novel, violence cannot be directed only towards the white community, rather the violence here becomes internalized where the suffering is inflicted upon one community and in turn to other members of the black extended community. The cyclic nature of violence starts as white-on-black violence and moves into the black community and proceeds as black-on-black violence.

The horrors of war are brought out through the experience of Olanna in the train where she sees a woman cuddling a calabash approached her and showed her daughter's head:

‘*Bianu*, come,’ she said. ‘Come and take a look.’ She opened the calabash. ‘Take a look,’ she said again. Olanna looked into the bowl. She saw the little girl's head with the ashy-grey skin and plaited hair and rolled-back eyes and open mouth. She stared at it for a while before she looked away. Somebody screamed. The woman closed the calabash. ‘Do you know,’ she said, ‘it took me so long to plait this hair? She had such thick hair.’ (91)

Olanna even tells Odenigbo about the evils of the Muslim Hausa people in Kano where she has witnessed – “the headless bodies . . . the corpses that lay in the yard.” (96) Bombing occurs even during the wedding of Odenigbo and Olanna. Ugwu sees “the planes gliding beneath the blue sky like two birds of prey.” (126) People gather together to help them and muttered “they (bombs) would continue to fall until everything was destroyed and everyone died.” (126) The most devastating influence of the war which Olanna encountered is the act of Abdulmalik, an Hausa whose brutal action in killing the Mbaezi family who are Igbo people in spite of

their friendship. The other evil acts of war include killing and resecting pregnant women and the rape of young girls. The victims are Nnesinachi, Ugwu's neighbour who has a relationship with a Hausa soldier and becomes pregnant and Anulika, Ugwu's sister who has been forcibly raped by five Nigerian soldiers.

As a result of the war individuals are starved to death. They are completely powerless and are unable to influence their own environment. This is characterized by Olanna. When she tries to get some food for her baby while staying in the relief center she feels 'uncomfortable' (169) to stand in a queue and beg for food and the sheer despondency and powerlessness when the soldiers try to attack her. She even sees Nigerian soldiers laughing and gesturing to the village girls saying "Come marry me now, I go give you rice and beans." (259) Alice, Olanna's neighbor also states the condition of her hometown, Asaba:

"The vandals took our town many weeks ago and they announced that all indigenes should come out and say 'One Nigeria' and they would give them rice. So people came out of hiding and said 'One Nigeria' and the vandals shot men, women and children. Everyone." (242)

Adichie universalizes the inhumanity of all wars by bringing in the horrors of other wars. She brings in the character of Richard, a white man who calls himself a Biafran, wants to write a book about Nigeria. He recounts the story of a woman with the calabash for the prologue and concurrently mentions: "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 babies." (49) Later, in the last part of the novel a character redhead says, "People are dying in Sudan and Palestine and Vietnam. People are dying everywhere." (235)

Although there is a clear accusation of Western influence on Biafran war (mostly England's involvement in the war), a more subtle critique is found in Richard's character. Richard, although with good intentions, tries too hard to be part of first Nigeria, and later Biafra. His fascination with the culture and his wish to be part of Biafra leads to him speaking for Biafrans by attempting to write two novels, one about the art, and the second one about the Biafran war. Richard is unable to complete either, and concludes that these are not his stories to tell. However, he is effective when he writes about the war for the Western press, which actually helps Biafra's cause. Adichie herself has said in an interview, that "maybe [Richard's character] is my subtle way of slipping in my politics that maybe it's time that Africans wrote about Africa." [3]

Memory plays an important role in Postcolonial writing. Memory links the past with the present and builds a sense of collective identity. Memories are sometimes painful and traumatic. It constructs a historical narrative of slavery and imperialism and encourages victims to remember the violence of the past and nurture healing. Adichie presents the traumatic memory of war through the character of Ugwu. Ugwu

embodies the collective and individual consciousness of Biafra war. He represents the memories of ordinary living - during his role as a houseboy and traumatic memories of the war - during his act of fighting in it as a child soldier. He engages in an anti-colonial consciousness through his master Odenigbo.

‘There are two answers to the things they will teach you about our land: the real answer and the answer you give in school to pass. You must read books and learn both answers. I will give you books, excellent books.’ Master stopped to sip his tea. ‘They will teach you that a white man called Mungo Park discovered River Niger. That is rubbish. Our people fished in the Niger long before Mungo Park’s grandfather was born. But in your exam, write that it was Mungo Park.’

‘Yes, sah.’ Ugwu wished that this person called Mungo Park had not offended master so much. (6)

Ugwu’s authorial role begins as he experiences the war. The memory of life in Nsukka has deeply affected Ugwu and his employers because normal life has been forcibly altered by the soldiers and has resulted in the collapse of the town and material discomfort. Ugwu tries to uphold his traumatic experiences through the act of writing. Ugwu encounters his destiny when he gets wounded and gets into coma while the war slowly comes to an end. When he comes out of the hospital he is regarded as an embodiment of trauma and memory, states Christopher E. W. Ouma in his article “Composite Consciousness and Memories of War in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun*”. The scars of his body turn to be the remainder of pain, trauma and memory. He suffers his trauma through the constant dreams of the sounds of shelling, the descent of Biafran soldiers and the incessant crying of people in the battle. The protagonists – Odenigbo, Olanna and Ugwu’s return to Nsukka enable them to recapture the past. Odenigbo and Olanna are reminded of the Biafran flag and Biafran pounds which are also part of the material culture of memory.

She lay on the living room floor and prayed that they would not find her Biafran pounds. After they left, she took the folded notes out from the envelope hidden in her shoe and went out and lit a match under the lemon tree. Odenigbo watched her. He disapproved, she knew, because he kept his flag folded inside the pocket of a pair of trousers. ‘You are burning memory,’ he told her. ‘I am not.’ She would not place her memory on things that strangers could barge in and take away. ‘My memory is inside me.’ (271)

Nsukka, therefore, is permeated by the memories of the past and the scars of the present. Ugwu’s memory carries him through the process of a houseboy to an intellectual to a Biafran soldier and indeed as an authorial voice.

Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* defines violence as a 'cleansing force' (69) which liberates people from their hopelessness and makes them fearless and restores their self-respect. Suffering gives a sense of hope to the lives of the individuals. People believe that the 'Nigerians would let Biafra free' (103) and 'Biafra will win the war' (173). Even Richard plans to write the book 'The World Was Silent When We Died' after the war as a narrative of Biafra's difficult victory. (236) Whereas the Biafrans are defeated in the war and the dream of an independent nation have been disillusioned but still they have the hope to rise and come back. Olanna towards the end of the novel asserts:

"The war has ended but hunger has not... We come back again"... "Our people say that we all reincarnate, don't they?" (272)

Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* has brilliantly recreated the horrors of living through war. Adichie has established the realities of war and its effect on individuals, relationships and the nation as a whole. The author's final note is the most inspiring: "What matters is not what they went through but that they survived." (274)

Half of a Yellow Sun is a beautifully written, beautifully composed domestic tale of fidelity, infidelity, loyalty and opportunism. The contrast between the characters' and therefore the nation's lives at the start and the end of the decade is engaging. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie captures the spirit of Africa, the warmth, the kindness and the energy. She has the ability to present the poverty, hardships, and other challenges with compassion. The cultures are rich; the people endearing and the story uplifting. The Washington Post states: "Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie certainly lives up to the hype in her second novel, *Half a Yellow Sun*. She wows us with this transcendent tale about war, loyalty, brutality, and love in modern Africa. While painting a searing portrait of the tragedy that took place in Biafra during the 1960s, her story finds its true heart in the intimacy of three ordinary lives buffeted by the winds of fate. Her tale is hauntingly evocative and impossible to forget." [10].

Furthermore, Rob Nixon also captured the essence of criticism by writing a review acknowledging the historical side of the novel: "Half of a Yellow Sun takes us inside ordinary lives laid waste by the all too ordinary unraveling of nation states. When an acquaintance of Olanna's turns up at a refugee camp, she notices that – he was thinner and lankier than she remembered and looked as though he would break in two if he sat down abruptly. – It's a measure of Adichie's mastery of small things – and of the mess the world is in – that we see that man arrive, in country after country, again and again and again."

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