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# 'The danger of a single story' in Chimamanda N. Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*

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## Introduction

Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* is a complex work of fiction and in the past seven years it has been given a great deal of attention from literary critics who have tried different approaches and provided different interpretations.

This thesis deals with 'the danger of a single story' theme in the novel and traces all the multifaceted stories about Nigeria that Adichie offers as a counterpart. In the speech with the same name the writer questions ideas such as the potential of a single narrative to create stereotypes and the importance of bringing forth several stories of representation with the intent to enlighten and inform about the urgency of the search for knowledge, about the proper understanding of the 'other'. The speech talks as well about the issue of power that is closely connected to the construction of the single story. The stories have been used to expropriate and label, but can also be used to empower and humanize. Accordingly, the writer says, many stories matter. While we cannot know every story, we are capable of recognizing that there is “a balance of stories”, and it is what the writer brings forth in her novel.

The second chapter provides a comprehensive background to Adichie's novel. The first part of the chapter traces the line of work of the third generation of Nigerian writers to which the author belongs, their ways of questioning such constructs as history, nation, home, tradition and gender and exploring once-tabooed themes of patriarchal order and authority, their penchant for experimentation with language, and their renewed interest in the Biafran war. After a few words about her impressive biography and the amount of awards she received for her work, the following part mentions the important role Achinua Achebe played for Adichie and how he taught her to challenge the Western images of Nigeria and the stereotypes of Africa. Since the Biafran war plays such an important part in the novel, there is also a brief presentation of the conflict and the political

and economical reasons that led to it. The chapter concludes with a short analysis about Adichie's indebtedness to the tradition of Nigerian civil war literature and the homage she rendered to Biafra since her early works.

The proper analysis of *Half of a Yellow Sun* starts with the third chapter, which deals with the rehistoricisation of the Biafran War in the novel and how, in order to give her own version of the past, the writer uses an original narrative structure and a mix of historical and 'imaginative' truths with fiction. The focus is on the way in which the novel applies the historical knowledge to the characters' life, the way in which the history is experienced by ordinary people. After a first presentation of what it means to be human during the war, the second part of the chapter emphasises the "unapologetic Biafran sympathies" in rendering the war and the importance of many stories in approaching the complexity of the past. The last part stresses the role played by the gaps and erasures in the historicisation and how, by not offering any closure, the book dramatises the impossibility to comprehend fully the Biafran War.

The fourth chapter of the thesis foregrounds the importance of a balance of stories in rendering the diversity of the African experience. It analyses the way in which Adichie contends with a mix of several different stories and different narrators and how this diversity is also mirrored in the structure of the novel: the chapters are alternatively told from one of the three main characters' point of view and follow a structural cyclical and almost symmetrical pattern, and the points of view shift together with the chronology. Against Africa's stereotyped image as a place of poverty, the writer brings to life characters belonging to different genders or races, different classes and with different points of view. The following parts treat separately Ugwu's, Richard's and Olanna's visions as three very different narrators. All three of them have a different story to tell and all three participate in their own way to the collective story of Biafra. Throughout the novel, Ugwu metamorphoses from a simple teenager to an informed young adult writer and the way he is shaped validates the author's own role as a writer showing the different ways in which history can be

preserved. The first part dedicated to the houseboy analyses his role as an observer through which the reader is offered an insight into the lives and thoughts of Olanna and Odenigbo; the second part emphasises the importance of his authorial role in the narrative. Through the character of Richard, Adichie makes a strong political point about the question of authorship and its relationship to history. By realizing that her story has a collective importance and has to be shared with the community and included into the collective memory, Olanna, as a traumatised witness, is the third character who exemplifies the importance of narration, its relevance in dealing with the past and its therapeutic effect for everybody involved. The last part is built upon gender issues and, since it has been claimed that there aren't African feminists because to be African meant a disregard of feminism, Adichie goes to great lengths to emphasize the importance of the role women played during the war. It presents the way in which the two main female characters, Olanna and Kainene, move from a marginal position to a position where the traumatic experiences suffered by one as well as the courage and sacrifice of the other become personifications of the reason for which the war was fought.

Having already asserted that *Half of a Yellow Sun* is more a novel about love than about war, the fifth chapter foregrounds the important role played by sexuality during the conflict and how it should be interpreted as an affirmation of life. It also questions what Adichie calls "African authenticity", since there are stereotyped images about what a proper African book is considered to be. Considering the inherent power stories have to humanize and to transport the reader into another world, the second part of the chapter mentions the writer's fascination with food, how it can almost be considered as a character in itself and how, through it, the writer traces the regression of the characters.

The last chapter stresses the way the author deals with language, the deliberate use of untranslated Igbo sentences and words. She takes possession of the English language, since for her generation English is no longer the language of the colonizer but her own, a familiar and rooted

English, and emphasizes the importance of stories, many African stories, no matter the language they are conveyed in. Adichie points out again the stereotyped image of Africa, which does not depend often on the colonial Other who cannot speak, but on the Western interlocutor who cannot listen, and at the principle of 'nkali', the power of labelling.

## Chapter I

### The danger of a single story

#### 1.1 Adichie's speech

In 2009, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, whose writings deal with ethnicity, gender and identity, was the youngest person to deliver the annual Commonwealth lecture at the Guildhall; her TED lecture on culture, life, national identity and its many overlapping stories, 'The Danger of a Single Story', is one of its most popular.

TED, which started out in 1984 as a conference bringing together people from the Technology, Entertainment and Design fields, is a non-governmental organization devoted to ideas worth spreading. Its two annual Ted conferences based on the North American West Coast and in Edinburgh, Scotland, connect the world's most interesting personalities, writers and researchers, who are called out to give the speech of their lives in less than 18 minutes. Along with the two major annual conferences, the organization is involved in TEDTalks, TED Conversations, TED Fellows and TED programs, whose contents spread from science, technology and business to art, entertainment, design and global issues. A global community that stimulates communication and exchange, TED believes in the power of ideas to change the world and helps amplifying the impact of the community's projects by supporting innovators from every discipline and culture.<sup>1</sup>

The speech contains some of the distinctive characteristics of the third generation of Nigerian writers, of which Adichie is a member since her novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* has been hailed by critics as “perhaps one of the richest creative works yet to appear on the subject of the Nigerian Civil War” and which “marks, as for now, the achievement in a resuscitation of the

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1 <http://www.ted.com/>

Nigerian Civil War novel in recent years”.<sup>2</sup> The writer is thus keen in giving voice to marginal identities, raising gender issues and breaking taboos; giving a new, contemporary interpretation to longstanding themes; engaging with hybridisation and multiculturalism; challenging social and literary conventions; presenting a multi-layered, hybrid personality; and reflecting national and political engagement.<sup>3</sup>

Novelist Chimamanda Adichie tells the story of how she found her authentic cultural voice and warns that if we hear only a single story about another person or country, we risk a critical misunderstanding. The 'danger of a single story' is the potential of a single narrative to create stereotypes, to offer a small, limited stereotypical frame to what a culture is. The writer brings forth several stories of representation with the intent to enlighten and inform about the urgency of the search for knowledge, about the proper understanding of the 'other'.

The author begins her speech by telling stories about single stories: her conviction, as a child, that the family of the houseboy her family was only poor and her surprise to discover that they were able to produce a handcrafted raffia basket that challenged the idea of poverty she had about them. How, by coming to attend university in the United States, she experienced inverse episodes of the single story: the shock her roommate had in discovering that Chimamanda spoke perfect English and that she listened to music no different than any other young girl. Her roommate had a single story about Africa, about catastrophe and the impossibility, for Africans, to be similar to her in any way, to connect as equal human beings: “Her default position toward me, as African, was a kind of well-intentioned arrogance”. Adichie discovered also that the story America and the Western literature told about Africa was of “a place of beautiful landscapes, beautiful animals and incomprehensible people fighting senseless wars, dying of poverty and AIDS, unable to speak for themselves. And waiting to be saved by a kind white foreign”. Many Americans have the mistaken

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2 Akpome, Aghogho, 'Narrating a New Nationalism: Exploring the Ideological and Stylistic Influence of Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987) on Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006)', MA thesis, University of Johannesburg, South Africa, 2012, pp. 150, p. 23

3 Smit, Willem Jacobus, 'Becoming the Third Generation: Negotiating Modern Selves in Nigerian Bildungsromane of the 21st Century', MA thesis, Stellenbosch University, South Africa, 2009, pp. 128, p. 1

conception of the idea of “Africa” as it is represented by colonial discourse, in Hollywood or by media lenses that depict it negatively and dismissively.

The shrewd viciousness of the single story is that no one is absolved of society-prescribed judgment and one-dimensionality. It is difficult to outright reject every single story we know because we unconsciously harbour assumptions about places and people without active thought or acknowledgment. The writer herself fell victim to America's single story of “immigration is synonymous with Mexicans” when, during a trip to Guadalajara, she realized not all Mexicans are scheming criminals trying to hop the border. “I realized that I had been so immersed in the media coverage of Mexicans that they had become one thing in my mind: the abject immigrant. I had bought into the single story of Mexicans and I could not have been more ashamed of myself”.<sup>4</sup>

Faced with so many examples, the question arises: how to produce a unique story? Adichie warns that to have a single story about a people is enough to show it again and again till it becomes the only narrative. A single story pigeonholes the world to the scope of one individual, thwarts possibilities of realistic images and expectations. It’s a narrative that compresses a diverse group into one single stereotype, one plot with no room for subplots or alternate story lines. By repetitively hearing the stories, the way we perceive the world becomes inaccurate and oversimplified.

It is impossible to talk about the construction of the single story without mentioning the issue of power. How the stories are told, who tells them, when and how many stories are told really depend on power. That is, “power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person”,<sup>5</sup> says the author. The problem with stereotypes is not that they are wrong, but that they are incomplete, “they make one story become the only story”, they offer superficial experience and neglect all other narratives that make a place or a person.

“It is impossible to engage properly with a place or a person without engaging with all of the

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4 'The Danger of a Single Story', TED: Ideas Worth Spreading, October 2009, [http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story.html)

5 'The Danger of a Single Story', TED: Ideas Worth Spreading

stories of that place and that person. The consequence of the single story is this: It robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar”.<sup>6</sup> A single story distorts the reality and, by recreating the same patterns, carries little information and mystifies the object.

These stories also present an existential danger. We become sheltered by a self-fashioned bubble of cognitive dissonance and ignorance, one that saves us from a world that is complex and difficult to understand but also endlessly diverse, forever intriguing, and unimaginably colourful. Adichie warns about the dangers of the single story: “All of these stories make me who I am. But to insist on only these negative stories is to flatten my experience and to overlook the many other stories that formed me”.<sup>7</sup>

The stories have been used to expropriate and label, but can also be used to empower and humanize, can destroy the dignity of a people, but also can restore this lost dignity. Accordingly, Adichie says, many stories matter. While we can’t know every story, we are capable of recognizing that there is more than one side to it, and of appreciating this innate deficiency of information and perspective. “When we reject the single story, when we realize that there is never a single story about any place, we regain a kind of paradise”,<sup>8</sup> she brilliantly concludes. Abandoning the single story of any place or person is an effort that takes introspective thinking, empathy, and constant recognition of our shared humanity, that we are similar despite our differences.

The writer in her work resists stereotypical views of Africa and is determined to show that Africa is not one huge refugee camp. There are many stories to be told and just some of them involve suffering and dependency or exoticism and wildlife. Africa is a place where class exists, where people have cars and don't starve to death and that doesn't make them less authentically African. Adichie makes a point in writing in her Orange prize-winning novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, about the “other Africa”, about people belonging to the empowered, middle-class: two twin sisters,

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6 'The Danger of a Single Story', TED: Ideas Worth Spreading

7 'The Danger of a Single Story'

8 'The Danger of a Single Story'

daughters of a wealthy businessman and a university professor. The author feels very strongly about the fact that Africans must write their own stories and not let the West do the naming and labelling for them. Another key character is Ugwu, a houseboy from a poor village who emerges as the conscience of the novel and who will be the one to write at the end a book on the war, rather than Richard, the Englishman who has been taking notes throughout of the conflict.<sup>9</sup>

While being an African writer comes always with some cultural and ethnical baggage and the writers are expected to explain their country's politics, Adichie declares that she's more concerned with what “the grittiness of being human”. More than politics she wanted to write a book about relationships and about people who enjoyed life. In order to achieve it, she created what Achebe called “a balance of stories” and she moved from one voice to another throughout the novel: from Ugwu’s perspective, to Olanna’s voice, to Richard’s blunders, returning to Ugwu and then back to Richard. Through each character’s introspection we get, not only varying pictures of what it means to simply be alive and inhabiting that particular body and circumstance, but also different ideas about what it means to be “authentically” Igbo, different notions of survival and insight into the psyches of the three classes that would negotiate living in Nigeria during the Biafran conflict: the non-Western village boy, the foreigner and the Nigerian intellectual. Each has a different idea about survival.<sup>10</sup>

The writer also shies away from labels and definitions, anything that could become patronizing: “I think what I’m trying to come to terms with the idea of many labels. You know, there are times when I’m quite happy to embrace the idea that I’m a feminist writer, an Igbo writer, a Nigerian writer, a black writer, blah blah blah. But there are times when that context is patronizing. And that’s when I get really defensive”.<sup>11</sup> Adichie describes herself as a “happy feminist” as a tongue-in-cheek way of responding to the idea of feminism being inherently sour and

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9 'With Orange in hand, the English Rob Chimamanda', The Guardian of London, 11th June 2007, [http://www.igbofocus.co.uk/Chimamanda\\_Ngozi\\_Adichie/chimamanda\\_ngozi\\_adichie.html#With-orange](http://www.igbofocus.co.uk/Chimamanda_Ngozi_Adichie/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie.html#With-orange)

10 Nigerian literature, 'The danger of a single story', <http://naijalit.wordpress.com/2012/02/09/the-danger-of-a-single-story/>

11 'How Do You Write a Love Story With Teeth? A conversation with novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie', interview by Nina Shen Rastogi, Double X, 29 June 2009

joyless, of being “angry women who cannot find husbands”. Being accused by a young man in Lagos that she has been “poisoned by the West” and that there is no such thing as an African feminist since being African means automatically a disregard of feminism, Adichie, in one of her lectures,<sup>12</sup> tells the story of her first encounter with the gender inequity during a primary school experience when she has nine, when a boy was chosen over her to be the class monitor, despite the fact that she was the best academic student. The issue might be the word-choice, since there are people who associate feminism with “hairy women burning bras” and so refuse the label of feminists. Either way labelling involves power, “power that comes from the very act of naming something”, it doesn't allow the performance of citizenship. Adichie questions the mutual exclusion of being feminist and African and defines feminism as “an acknowledgement of and a desire to change the fact that men have in most if not all of the world had social, economic and political privileges solely because they are men”.<sup>13</sup>

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12 'The Writer as Two Selves: Reflections on the Private Act of Writing and the Public Act of Citizenship', lecture delivered at Princeton University, 20 October 2010.

[http://hulk03.princeton.edu:8080/WebMedia/flash/lectures/20101020\\_publect\\_adichie.shtml](http://hulk03.princeton.edu:8080/WebMedia/flash/lectures/20101020_publect_adichie.shtml)

13 'The Writer as Two Selves: Reflections on the Private Act of Writing and the Public Act of Citizenship'

## Chapter II

### Adichie and Nigerian literature

#### 2.1 Third generation of Nigerian writers

Since Africa, in Eurocentric eyes, has been seen as a wild and savage place where people were suffering hunger but were unable to take care of themselves because of their uncivilised and brawly nature, the subject of “authentic African Literature” has always been debated and being called an “African writer” has been contested. The labelling is supposed to limit the achievement of a writer or, in the best case scenario, is perceived as a restriction, but it can also help in heightening the writer's consciousness and his awareness towards the “falsified compartmentalization of thought”.<sup>1</sup>

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, in his article, 'Writing Against Neo-colonialism' (1994), provides a historical and political frame to the periodisation of literature in Africa, division that can also work for Nigeria's literature: the age of anti-colonial struggle, the age of independence and the age of neo-colonialism. Each generation publishes within a certain time-frame and seems to be characterized by an important event in history that influences and determines each generation's writing. The African novel, having emerged from the newly formed nations during the period of Africa's independence is synonymous with the project of constructing national identity. Charles Nnolim instead, in his essay 'Trends in the Nigerian Novel' fears a division will over-simplify the intricate relationship between the environment and the deriving literature and suggests regarding “a literary period as a time-section dominated by a set of conventions which have crystallized around

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1 O'okwemba, Khainga, 'Chimamanda Adichie's Visit to Negritude Shrine', Nairobi Star, 30 June 2011, <http://www.the-star.co.ke/news/article-58784/chimamanda-adichies-visit-negritude-shrine>

certain historical or political events and possibly modified the concept of the whole period”.<sup>2</sup>

Generalizations regarding Nigerian literature or its division into generational categories lose coherence when examined too closely or are overloaded by historical events, but can be used as a general guide and a point of departure when deployed from a distance.

The first generation of Nigerian writers was mostly born during the first fifty years of the twentieth century and the last decades of colonial domination and published their works till shortly after the independence, from the 1940s to the late 1960s. Their writings bore the signs of that experience and were, therefore, permeated with anti-colonial nationalism, aiming at asserting the worth of the indigenous Nigerian cultures and the value of Nigerian-ness. Both in their novels and poetry, the writers belonging to the first generation looked for the re-establishment of an identity deriving from the traditional heritage, from myths and folklore but which had previously been contaminated by the colonialism.<sup>3</sup>

Chief among these authors is Achinua Achebe, seen as the father of African literature and whose works paved the way for many succeeding writers. Another writer is the politically committed Wole Soyinka, who became the first African to win the Nobel Prize for literature in 1986.<sup>4</sup> Some of the other notable writers of this first generation are Amos Tutuola, Cyprian Ekwensi, Christopher Okigbo, John Pepper Clark and Flora Nwapa. They belonged to an educated, elite class whose distinctive feature was cultural nationalism and whose personal identity was usually connected to a national identity, and their main themes were the contract between tradition and modernity and the critique of the neocolonial reality.<sup>5</sup>

The second generation of writers, although born during the colonial period, were shaped by independence and left their mark in the decade following the Nigerian-Biafran war and its aftermath of alienation, frustration and stasis. After the war, the themes of anti-colonial nationalism and

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2 Smit, Willem Jacobus, 'Becoming the Third Generation: Negotiating Modern Selves in Nigerian Bildungsromane of the 21st Century', p. 3

3 Smit, Willem Jacobus, 'Becoming the Third Generation', p. 6

4 Tunca, Daria, 'Stylistic Issues in New Nigerian Literature', University of Liège, Belgium

5 Kurtz, J. Roger, 'The Intertextual Imagination in *Purple Hibiscus*', *Ariel* 42.2 (2011), p. 30

reconstruction of the traditional heritage collapsed and were replaced by the depiction of an oppressed Nigerian society where the exploiter was often the neocolonial government. The writers presented the image of a society invaded by a sense of disillusionment and violence, searching for different definitions of nation and identity.<sup>6</sup> The conflict interrupted Nigeria's economic, political and social development and therefore the development of literary writing since the country wasn't even able to sustain its own publishing industry. On an ideological level, it altered the sense of social purpose that characterised much of the earlier writing.<sup>7</sup> Starting with Ben Okri, some writers employed magical realist techniques which helped them come to terms with the state of their shattered nation, whilst other writers used their novels as a form of protest, a cry denouncing the existential crisis and an attack on social injustice.<sup>8</sup> The second-generation authors include names such as Odia Ofeimun, Tanure Ojaide, Buchi Emecheta, Femi Osofican and Niyi Osundare and Ben Okri, which I previously mentioned.

Till 2005 little scholarship had been done on contemporary Nigerian literature but in May of the same year the first compilation of academic essays regarding the third-generation works appeared in an issue of 'English in Africa', edited by Pius Adesanmi and Chris Dunton and, three years later, another special issue was published in 'Research in African Literatures', guest-edited by the same critics. As Adesanmi and Dunton noted, the first decade after the 1980s saw the predominance of poetry, but from the 1990s onwards there was a significant shift from poetry to novels, which constitutes the narrative of the nation.<sup>9</sup>

Among these writers, the two critics have identified Chimamanda Adichie, Helon Habila and Chris Abani as key members and stressed their “phenomenal rise” and the “near instant canonisation” of their texts.<sup>10</sup> Other writers that are both heirs of the Nigerian literary tradition and symbols of a new creative movement are Helen Oyeyemi, Chika Unigwe, Sefi Atta, Okey Ndibe,

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6 Smit, Willem Jacobus, 'Becoming the Third Generation', p. 7

7 Rushton, Amy, 'Trashing National Identity: The Portrayal of Ethnic Conflict in the Contemporary African Novel', *GLITS-e: A Journal of Criticism* 2 (2011-2012)

8 Smit, Willem Jacobus, 'Becoming the Third Generation', p. 7

9 Smit, Willem Jacobus, 'Becoming the Third Generation', p. 7

10 Akpome, Aghogho, 'Narrating a New Nationalism', p. 23

Akachi Ezeigbo, Chuks Iloegbunam, Biyi Bandele-Thomas, Emeka Aniagolu, Maik Nwosu, Diran Adebayo, Uzo Maxim Uzoatu, Promise Okekwe, Sanya Osha, Akin Adesokan, Unoma Azuah, Ike Okonta, Dulue Mbachu, Ike Oguine, Toni Kan Onwordi, Nduka Otiono, Chinedu Ogoke, Segun Afolabi and Uzo Iweala.

The term third-generation refers more to an emerging literary trend since the authors belonging to this generation are relatively young and their works, which have already received international acclaim, are continuously being published.<sup>11</sup> Some distinctive features though can already be traced since the texts contain similar themes and formal characteristics, and focus on a new, contemporary type of identity. In this climate of ruined postcolonial promise, their novels are questioning what it means to be Nigerian and, by extension, African.

Starting in the late 1980s, this recent third-generation literature negotiates an identity immersed in Nigeria's current political and socio-economic situation, a present permeated by a trans-national consciousness and by hybrid cultural forms. Nigeria is felt, today, like a hybrid state, a nation of multiple nations merged to form the basis of nation-ness.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, unlike the writers from the previous generations whose texts offered a unitary identity, the recent Nigerian novels present multi-layered individuals, composed of various cultural elements and traditions, thriving into a hybrid, multicultural environment and performing an identity that doesn't necessarily conform to the rules imposed by society. There is a particular interest in the exploration of characters' emotional development. The constructs of history, nation, home, tradition and gender are being questioned, together with notions such as "Otherness" and "subalternity".<sup>13</sup>

The hybrid identity in novels and their transnational setting derive also from the fact that many third-generational writers are either living abroad, or – as is the case with Chimamanda Adichie – are dividing their time between Nigeria and the United States or England. The works can

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11 Smit, Willem Jacobus, 'Becoming the Third Generation', p. 1

12 Nwakanma, Obi, 'Metonymic Eruptions: Igbo Novelists, the Narrative of the Nation, and New Developments in the Contemporary Nigerian Novel', *Research in African Literatures*. Bloomington: Summer 2008. Vol. 39, Iss. 2; pg. 1, 14 pgs, p. 2

13 Smit, Willem Jacobus, 'Becoming the Third Generation', p. 8

therefore explore Nigeria's cultural and social complexities, the disturbing political activity during Abacha's dictatorship or the ruins of a devastated country after the civil war, but also deal with diasporic identities and immigration issues to Europe and America. The anti-colonial nationalism, the postcolonial angst and the sense of loss that defined the first generation becomes a marginal discourse and is replaced by a fusion of numerous cultural, political, and economical discourses, a multicultural frame where each individual is able to negotiate its identity, to struggle for agency, to claim ownership from the past and, simultaneously, from other cultures, from multiple ancestries and histories.

There are intertextual connections between the current literary generation and the previous two. The last generation cast an eye back toward their literary forefathers - in particular Chinua Achebe but also Soyinka, Ekwensi and Emecheta - and draws inspiration from their themes, which they reinterpret and represent in a more contemporary point of view.<sup>14</sup>

The search for a new identity and agency is similar to the postcolonial theorist Achille Mbembe's claim that Africans should find an unconventional way to define their identity, away from the two dominant paradigms that defined the past: Afro-radicalism and nativism. Both alienate the individual from the self because of their baggage of slavery and colonisation and both promote a discourse of dispossession by the other. The third generation moves away from the sense of alienation and victimhood that permeated the self-writing of the first two generations, since both models proposed dichotomies of white versus black, civilised peoples versus savages and Christianity versus paganism.<sup>15</sup>

This generation demonstrates also a penchant for experimentation with language that results from a level of ease and sophistication with English, which has become for all practical purposes their first language. As a result their texts are linguistically experimental, and in many cases their main thematic preoccupation is language itself. All of them show a remarkable skill in creating an

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14 Smit, Willem Jacobus, 'Becoming the Third Generation', p. 14

15 Smit, Willem Jacobus, 'Becoming the Third Generation', p. 24

identifiable and unique literary voice. Since they emphasize an individual rather than communal identity in their works, their linguistic choices reflect also a more individualistic outlook than the works of previous generations.<sup>16</sup>

Another distinctive characteristic of the third-generation writing is that it is completely realistic, with characters that live in the present and whose life is embedded in the immediacy of Nigerian life, it shuns away from the exoticism and the imaginary realities that defined some of the second-generation works. The main framework in which the new identity is negotiated include silenced domestic places, religious and cultural traditions, socioeconomic and political contexts, constructs of gender and nation.<sup>17</sup>

Obi Nwakanma, in his research called 'Metonymic Eruptions: Igbo Novelists, the Narrative of the Nation, and New Developments in the Contemporary Nigerian Novel' points out to the overwhelming presence of writers of Igbo origin both in the first and in the third generation of writers, and asserts their role in defining the canon of contemporary Nigerian national literature.<sup>18</sup> He cites Homi Bhabha and his term "DissemiNation" as a main feature of the narrative of the postcolonial nation, implying the scattering of people beyond frontiers and boundaries and defining the postcolonial novel as the product of the migration of memory. The term seems to define the Igbo novelists, the most dispersed ethnic group, since they keep searching for a coherent meaning of the idea of the nation.<sup>19</sup> Obi Nwakanma believes that Biafra's secession brought with it the sense of ambivalence, dislocation, and marginality that Igbo writers started to associate with their sense of nation and national belonging. The flourishing of poetry and drama testifies nothing other than the deep ambiguity Igbo felt about the nation and accounts for the absence of imaginative figuration about Nigeria till 1985 and the ambivalence the ironic stance that characterises Nigeria's contemporary fiction.

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16 Kurtz, J. Roger, 'The Intertextual Imagination in Purple Hibiscus', *Ariel* 42.2 (2011), pp. 33

17 Greene, Andrée, 'Homeland', *Boston Review* 32.2, March-April 2007

18 Nwakanma, Obi, 'Metonymic Eruptions', p. 3

19 Nwakanma, Obi, 'Metonymic Eruptions', p. 5

In the last decade there was also a development in Nigerian feminist discourse and, with the formation of WRITA, the women's writers association, there has also been an emergence of women novelists. These women writers engender an important shift in the narrative of the nation and are gaining increasingly attention by putting the story of women in wider perspectives and exploring once-tabooed themes of patriarchal order and authority. Chimamanda Adichie has emerged as one of the most exciting contemporary novelists, earning international attention with her two novels, *Purple Hibiscus* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*.

With the arrival of the third-generation writers there was also a renewed interest in the Biafran war and, forty years after the conflict, their writings were able to revive inquiry and offer a new prospective on such themes as loss, violence, trauma and displacement. The war can be used as a microcosm for the political and ethnic upheaval of today's Nigeria, as in Dulue Mbachu's *War Games* (2005), or a universalisation of where civil conflict might lead to and what it does to human beings, as in Uzondinma Iweala's *Beast of No Nation* (2005) and Adichie's second novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006).

In very important ways, one of the main differences between the first-generation writers and the contemporary generation, in their shaping of the Nigerian novel, is that the earlier generation found a means to celebrate and establish the nation through its writings, while now, following the consequences of postcolonialism and the aftermath of the terrible Nigerian-Biafran conflict, the authors use the novel to question the meaning of nation and national belonging.<sup>20</sup>

## **2.2 Short biography of the author**

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, whose name translates loosely as “my spirit is unbreakable” as the writer herself would put it, was born on 15 September 1977 in Enugu, Nigeria into a “typical middle-class African family” with a university professor of statistics and deputy vice-chancellor for

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<sup>20</sup> Nwakanma, Obi, 'Metonymic Eruptions', p. 6

a father and a university registrar for a mother. She spent her childhood in the university town of Nsukka, in a house previously inhabited by Achinua Achebe, whose work she began to read from an early age.

Adichie started her university training to become a doctor in 1995 in Nigeria. She was thinking of herself as a writer from the age of six and even published a book of poetry at 16, which she defines now as “really bad, awful poetry,” but she decided to begin studying medicine because “in Nigeria, as in most developing countries”, she explained, “if you're smart in school you're supposed to be a doctor or a lawyer or an engineer. It was just assumed I would be a doctor. We value engineers or doctors or lawyers”.<sup>21</sup> But she left the following year to enrol at Drexel University, Philadelphia and transferred two years later to Eastern Connecticut State University, where her sister was living, to study Communications and political science where she graduated in 2001. After graduation, the writer received a scholarship to pursue her master's degree in creative writing at Johns Hopkins University. In 2005 she was a Hodder Fellow at Princeton University, and in 2006 Adichie enrolled again in African studies at Yale University, experience that she found disappointing. She has since taught creative writing in the US and in Nigeria.<sup>22</sup>

Her first novel, which Adichie dismisses as “horrible” and “very bad” and that was never published, was the Nigerian version of the immigrant story to the US and, in the process, she realized that what she really wanted to write about were true stories about Nigeria.

Her first published novel, *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), on which Adichie began to work while she was still a college senior, was shortlisted for the Orange Prize in 2004, the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize and long-listed for the Man Booker Prize and won the 2005 Commonwealth Writers Award for best first book and the Hurston/Wright Legacy Award for the debut fiction.<sup>23</sup> The book was also

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21 Patterson, Christina, 'Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: Fortunes of war and peace', Independent, 18 August 2006, <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/chimamanda-ngozi-adichie-fortunes-of-war-and-peace-412278.html>

22 Chadwyck-Healey, Literature biography, Cambridge, 2006, [http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=BIO027114&divLevel=0&trailId=13AA7F8E3FE&area=ref&forward=critref\\_ft](http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=BIO027114&divLevel=0&trailId=13AA7F8E3FE&area=ref&forward=critref_ft)

23 Preston, Edwina, Sydney Morning Herald, 23 September 2006, p. 35, <http://www.smh.com.au/news/book-reviews/half-of-a-yellow-sun/2006/09/22/1158431891184.html#>

chosen as Book of the Year by the San Francisco Chronicle.<sup>24</sup> After the publication of *Purple Hibiscus*, one critic called the author “Chinua Achebe's twenty-first-century daughter” and the shortlisting ranked Adichie, then 25, along with authors Margaret Atwood, Shirley Hazzard, Andrea Levy and Rose Tremain. *Purple Hibiscus* explores the tension between Igbo and Western culture and draws on certain aspects of her background: her home town and her Catholicism. A coming-of-age story narrated by a 15-year-old girl, it is a portrayal of an abusive childhood in a fanatically religious household, ruled by a charismatic and strict Catholic father who beats his wife and children in private for minor transgressions.<sup>25</sup> In the background looms an atmosphere of oppression and uncertainty, characteristic of the Abacha dictatorship of the 1990s.<sup>26</sup>

In her second novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2007), a drama about the Biafran war in the 1960s, Adichie draws from a page of modern African history and writes about the traumatising effects of the civil war on the life of several individuals.<sup>27</sup> Having their privileged lives swept up by the war, Olanna, her lover Odenigbo and Ugwu, are obliged to flee to the villages of Eastern Nigeria, where they must endure the chilling violence of war and have their values and morality challenged under dire circumstances. The novel has attracted beautiful words not only from Achebe who said “she came almost fully made” and called her “a new writer endowed with the gift of old storytellers”, but also from Joyce Carol Oates, who called it as "a worthy successor" to Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and VS Naipaul's *A Bend in the River*. The book won the Orange Broadband Prize for Fiction 2007 and was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award.<sup>28</sup>

*Half of a Yellow Sun* was also made into a film by first time film director Biyi Bandele, who also adapted the book to screenplay. It's a British-Nigerian co-production between the British Film Institute and a Nigerian private equity firm who worked together in order to bring the novel to the screen and assembled a pretty impressive cast in doing so: Thandie Newton as Olanna, Chiwetel

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24 'Per Contra Interviews: Miriam N. Kotzin with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie', Per Contra, Spring 2006

25 Patterson, Christina, 'Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: Fortunes of war and peace'

26 McGrath, Charles, 'A Nigerian Author Looking Unflinchingly at the Past', New York Times, September 2006, p. 7

27 '12 Questions for Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie', Interview with Jane Ciabattari, Critical Mass, 12 September 2006

28 Akubuiro, Henry, 'Digging into the Palimpsest: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and the Nigerian Tradition in Literature', Daily Sun, 3 December 2011

Ejiofor as Odenigbo, Anika Noni Rose as Kainene, Joseph Mawle as Richard and John Boyega as Ugwu are all involved. The film was shot on locations in the U.K. and Nigeria and made its world premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival in September 2013.

Adichie continued to write during this period, and several of her short stories were published in literary journals and won competition prizes. That same year, 2007, her short story "Half of a Yellow Sun" won the PEN/David Wong short story award.<sup>29</sup> Her collection of short stories, *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009), many of them honest and witty portraits of her home country or of Nigerian women and their uneasy life as immigrants in the United States, was also recognized for its excellence: it was shortlisted for the 2009 John Llewellyn-Rhys Memorial Prize and the 2010 Commonwealth Writers Prize for the best book from the African region.<sup>30</sup> The settings are often more mundane than what we were used to with in her novels, but the personal and the political issues are just as present.<sup>31</sup>

The author was also a finalist for the Caine Prize for African Writing in 2002 for the 2001 Story, "You in America" from *Zoetrope: All-Story Extra* and was the O. Henry Prize-winner in 2003 for the short story "The American Embassy," which had appeared in *Prism International*.<sup>32</sup>

Although best known for writing prose, she has also written and published poetry and a growing number of essays and lectures.<sup>33</sup> Adichie has also written an early play, *For Love of Biafra* (1998) where she registers the broken hopes of a Nigerian family during the Nigerian civil war. Her latest book, *Americanah* (2013), is a novel dealing with love and race issues and is centred on the story of two young people who left Nigeria and its military dictatorship to go abroad for studies and the difficulties they encountered along the way. 'Americanah' is the Nigerian word used for those who leave in search for a better life in America, as the writer explains in one of her interviews.<sup>34</sup>

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29 McGrath, Charles, 'A Nigerian Author Looking Unflinchingly at the Past'

30 Akpome, Aghogho, 'Narrating a New Nationalism', p. 22

31 'How Do You Write a Love Story With Teeth? A conversation with novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie'

32 'Per Contra Interviews: Miriam N. Kotzin with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie'

33 Akpome, Aghogho, 'Narrating a New Nationalism', p. 23

34 Obenson, Tambay, 'Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie Will Release 3rd Novel - Titled *Americanah* - In May 2013',

### 2.3 Chinua Achebe's legacy

The nature of the intertextual imagination in African literature is becoming increasingly rich and complex as time passes and as new generations of writers create new works. Oral literature is no longer the “fundamental reference of discourse”, but nowadays we increasingly witness the phenomenon of intergenerational intertextuality, as writers challenge and draw inspiration from not only their oral traditions on the one hand and European literary models on the other, but also from a progressively larger corpus of recent African writing.<sup>35</sup>

In an interview after the publication of *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Adichie says that the work is supposed to “provoke conversation”.<sup>36</sup> In fact, she has always invoked conversations between her works and those of Achebe and other earlier writers. Achebe is seen as the father of African literature, and as someone who opened the way for many other writers and links Adichie to the African literary tradition.<sup>37</sup> Achebe was also an unapologetic African writer who ‘wrote back’ in a wise, dignified and human way, challenging the Western images of Nigeria, swiping at the stereotypes of Africa and arguing for a literature of political engagement. Nelson Mandela called Achebe “the writer in whose presence the prison walls came down”.<sup>38</sup>

The young writer did not only live in a house previously occupied by Achebe in the university town of Nsukka, her biography has other parallels with Achebe’s. Like Achebe, Adichie also initially enrolled to study medicine at a Nigerian University, but after having been sent to the United States for her first degree, she switched courses and studied communication and political science first at Drexel and then at Eastern Connecticut State. She may be the first Nigerian author

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Indiewire, October 2012, <http://blogs.indiewire.com/shadowandact/chimamanda-ngozi-adichie-will-release-3rd-novel-titled-americanah-in-may-2013-details>

35 Kurtz, J. Roger, 'The Intertextual Imagination in *Purple Hibiscus*', p. 28

36 'My Book Should Provoke A Conversation - Chimamanda Ngozi', Interview with Wale Adebani, News (Nigeria), 9 January 2007.

37 Ouma, Christopher Ernest Werimo, 'Childhood in Contemporary Nigerian Fiction', PhD thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa, 2011, 340 pp, p. 25

38 'Chinua Achebe at 82: "We Remember Differently"', Premium Times (Nigeria), 23 November 2012

since Achebe to have comparable international fame at a very young age.

Adichie is categorical about her childhood influences. In her numerous interviews, she speaks over and over about the great influence Achebe and his novels *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* had on her writing and her writing career. She has credited Achebe for providing her with a model as a writer: “I like to think of Achebe as the writer whose work gave me permission to write my own stories”. His writings made her realize at an early age the distorted view she had about literature after reading mainly Enid Blyton stories and how emotionally false were the imitative stories she wrote. She discovered that the characters in a story shouldn't necessarily be white, English, drink ginger beer, eat apples or bagels, play in the snow or talk about the weather, but can also be populated by black people who ate mangoes and never talked about the weather, that people like herself could also exist in literature.<sup>39</sup>

Although *Things Fall Apart* was both familiar and exotic since it detailed the life of people who lived a hundred years earlier, Adichie felt Achebe's novel as part of her own story, something personal that might have happened in the life of her family, a story that filled up a hole in her education and taught her about the pride and complexity of being Nigerian.

*Things Fall Apart* was no longer a novel about a man whose exaggerated masculinity and encompassing fear of weakness make it impossible for him to adapt to the changes in his society, it became the life my great-grandfather might have lived. *Arrow of God* was no longer just about the British administration's creation of warrant chiefs, and the linked destinies of two men – one an Igbo priest the other a British administrator – it became the story of my ancestral hometown during my grandfather's time. *And No Longer at Ease* transcended the story of an educated young Nigerian struggling with the pressure of new urban expectations in Lagos, and became the story of my father's generation.<sup>40</sup>

Achebe's reciprocal statement that “she came almost fully made” and that she is a “new writer endowed with the gift of old storytellers”, lends some meaning to the idea of an alternative literary genealogy.<sup>41</sup>

After the publication of her first book *Purple Hibiscus*, in which she took up one of

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39 'An Interview with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie', Bookslut 87, by John Zuarino, August 2009

40 'The man who rediscovered Africa', salon.com, 23 January 2010

41 Ouma, Christopher Ernest Werimo, 'Childhood in Contemporary Nigerian Fiction', p. 26

Achebe's primary themes, the conflict between tribal religion and Christianity, one critic described Adichie as "Chinua Achebe's 21st Century daughter". She strategically refers to him by opening her novel with the words: "Things started to fall apart at home when my brother, Jaja, did not go to communion".<sup>42</sup> She describes Achebe as "the most important writer for me, and so every opportunity I have to pay tribute to him I'll take it".<sup>43</sup> In her second novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, she cites one of Achebe's poems in the epigraph. She takes a few lines from *Mango Seedling*, a poem which Achebe dedicated to the poet Christopher Okigbo: "Today I see it still – Dry, wire-thin in sun and dust of the dry months – Headstone on tiny debris of passionate courage". It is also believed that the character of Okeoma in Adichie's novel is meant as a homage to Okigbo. In citing Achebe's poem and creating the character of Okeoma, Adichie makes a double attempt to link her project with that of Achebe and create an intertextual relationship.<sup>44</sup> Adichie doesn't always offer a tribute to Achebe she also reinterprets and challenges his themes. The novel uses also a literary twist of a book within a book, paralleling the ironical ending of *Things Fall Apart*. In Adichie's novel, the author of the book is revealed to be Ugwu echoes the change of perspective at the end of *Things Fall Apart*: from the familiar Igbo of Okonkwo to the alien British of the District Commissioner.<sup>45</sup>

Adichie followed also in Achebe's path in using a type of language in which English was mingled with transpositions of Igbo expressions and proverbs into English.

## 2.4 The Biafran war

In order to be able to fully understand the historical context of the events described in the novel, it is essential to mention the causes of the conflict and explain how the tensions escalated into a war.

To this end, there is a vast amount of work and criticism on the Biafran war, as a proof that this

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42 Adichie, Chimamanda, *Purple Hibiscus*, Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2003, p. 3

43 Patterson, Christina, 'Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: Fortunes of war and peace'

44 De Mey, Joke, 'The Intersection of History, Literature and Trauma in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*', MA thesis, Ghent University, Belgium, 2011, 60 pp., p. 9

45 Murray, Senan, 'The new face of Nigerian literature?', BBC News, 8 June 2007, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/6731387.stm>

historic experience has continued to dominate the consciousness of Nigerians: Falola Toyin's *Colonialism and Violence in Nigeria* (2009) and Aleksandar Pavović's *Creating New States, Theory and Practice of Secession* (2007) are two of the works which focus on African history and shed light on the mechanisms of secession.<sup>46</sup>

In 1914, the British colonial powers divided the newly created territory of Nigeria in northern, eastern and western regions associating each with one of the three different major ethnic groups, the Igbo in the southeast, the Hausa-Fulani in the north and the Yoruba in the southwest, and ignoring the presence of other 250 smaller ethnic groups. The consequences of the divide-and-rule policy which was closer to a dictatorship than to a democracy, based on regional and ethnic affiliation challenged the consolidation of Nigeria as a nation-state after 1960.<sup>47</sup>

The regions had no common centres: the British economic policy of amalgamation led to regions with different interests, in competition with one another. In the North, the Western education brought by missionaries was discouraged in order to prevent their 'corrupting influence' on Islamic schools, but developed in the South. In the North the power systems were centralised, in South were more diffuse and the religions more different. In the North, colonialism established the old elite, while in the South it created a new Western-educated one, a group that would fight for independence in the 1950s and for the promulgation of the idea of 'nation' as opposed to that of 'tribe'. Colonial policy did not even try to succeed in spreading the idea of a nation.<sup>48</sup>

Due to less fertile soil, overpopulation and the search for work, the Igbo and other Easterners migrated to the northern parts of Nigeria. The lack of promotion of equality and of a sense of unity led to the first of the military coups which, in 1966, put an end to the First Republic. The coup, perceived as an "Igbo coup" aiming at disempowering and subjecting other groups, provoked resentment and gave rise to extensive pogroms against the Igbo and other eastern minorities in

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46 De Mey, Joke, 'The Intersection of History, Literature and Trauma', p. 3

47 Mzali, Ines, 'Postcolonial Readings of Resistance and Negotiation in Selected Contemporary African Writing', PhD thesis, University of Montréal, Canada, 2011, pp. 233-304, p. 256

48 'Things Left Unsaid', review of *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra*, by Chinua Achebe, London Review of Books 34.19 (October 2012), pp. 32-33

many northern cities. The countercoup in July 1966, sustained by the U.K. and the United States, didn't put an end to the raising violence, the killing of tens of thousands of Igbo and the exodus of a large number of Igbo and other easterners to the southeast. The extent of the genocidal action together with the passivity of the federal government stressed the need for the secession in the southeast. In 1967 Chukwuemeka Ojukwu declared the secession of the then Eastern Region of Nigerian and its independence under the name of Republic of Biafra, with its flag showing half of a rising sun that inspired Adichie for the title of her novel. The Nigerian government did not recognize the new republic and the civil war started shortly after.

The discovery of oil in 1958 within the borders of the state that wanted to become independent, pushed the federal government to hold the country together and, therefore, to crush any moves towards the Igbo independence. With the support of other countries, the federal troops blocked all of Biafra's links to the outside world which led to a great shortage of food and provoked the death of up to three million people from starvation. Ojukwu fled and Biafra surrendered to the federal troops in 1970, after three years of resistance despite the scarcity of weapons, means and soldiers.<sup>49</sup>

What complicated the issue of Biafra, whose impact was not limited to the Nigerian context, was the international contexts which transformed it into a globally entangled war, Biafra becoming a battleground for international interests and rivalries: France, Israel, South Africa and China sided with Biafra, Egypt and the former Soviet Union supported the federal government and America remained formally neutral.<sup>50</sup>

The history of the war and its consequences were silenced by the following economic stability, the presence of military regimes and the regionally reduced devastation. A number of post-war measures aimed at hindering the return to normality demonstrate a rather punitive policy and fuel since 1999 the revival of calls for secession of organizations such as MASSOB.<sup>51</sup>

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49 Mzali, Ines, 'Postcolonial Readings of Resistance and Negotiation', p. 237

50 Mzali, Ines, 'Postcolonial Readings of Resistance and Negotiation', p. 238

51 Mzali, Ines, 'Postcolonial Readings of Resistance and Negotiation', p. 239

## 2.5 Adichie's Biafra-related works

The decade within which Chimamanda Adichie was born represents the emerging of Biafran war literature. As she acknowledges in the novel *Half of a Yellow Sun*, her work is indebted to the tradition of Nigerian civil war literature. Adichie not only does homage to early works on Biafra but also stresses that Biafra is still a delicate subject:

I am often asked why I write about Biafra, as though it is something I have to justify. Imagine asking somebody to justify writing about the Holocaust. We do not just risk repeating history if we sweep it under the carpet, we also risk being myopic about our present. I was never taught about the war when I was in primary or secondary school - so if children today are not being taught that, how can they put what is happening today in perspective? How will they make connections that will enable them begin to understand what Nigeria is and why it is the way it is?<sup>52</sup>

Adichie starts very early to bring the subject of Biafra into her literary creation. In her interviews the writer states: “I have always been fascinated by Biafra. I have always wanted to write about it. It was not just because my parents told so many stories of how they lived through the Nigeria-Biafra war but because I realized how central Biafra was to my history. Because I grew up in the shadow of Biafra”.<sup>53</sup> In 1997 she wrote about the conflict in two poems in her poetry collection *Decisions*, namely “May Massacre” and “To my fatherland now and then” and, a year later, she published the drama entitled *For Love of Biafra*. Biafra-related works are also her short stories “Half of a Yellow Sun”, “That Harmattan Morning” and “Chinasa” written before her novel *Half of a Yellow Sun*, and “Ghosts” from the collection *The Thing around your neck*.<sup>54</sup>

Despite the fact that the author dismisses her early work, the drama *For Love of Biafra* is significant because of how it anticipates the themes in both her following novels *Purple Hibiscus* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*. She declares that: “I don’t like to talk about the play because I was so young when I wrote it and I cringe reading it now. I hadn’t thought of similarities until you asked this question but I realize now that both the novel and the play are really about how love can

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52 'In the Footsteps of Achebe: Enter Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Nigeria's Newest Literary Voice', Interview by Ikechukwu Anya, *Nigerians in America*, October 2003

53 'Author Q&A', Random House, 2006

54 Akubuiro, Henry, 'Digging into the Palimpsest: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and the Nigerian Tradition in Literature', *Daily Sun*, 3 December 2011

complicate the identities we construct for ourselves”.<sup>55</sup> It has been argued that “the juvenilia of authors is of interest partly because of whatever independent merit it may have, but mainly in its embryonic foreshadowing of the main body of their works” and in *Decisions* and *For Love of Biafra* the main thematic preoccupations and the deep passion that characterize Adichie's novels are already there.<sup>56</sup>

*Decisions*, Adichie’s poetry collection and first published book, addresses issues regarding dictatorship, civil rights struggles, ethnicity and the Nigerian civil war. Already in her 1995 poem “May Massacre”, written in memory of the May 1966 massacre of about three thousand Igbos in northern Nigeria, one can notice her personal attachment to the Biafran issue and the anticipation of the themes present in her subsequent writings:

They suffered the senseless killing / And their women painful rape.  
They, who for unity were willing / Unprepared for their tribe scrape.  
The ‘Sabon Garis’ were looted / And death awaited them still in awe  
At their race’s slaughter they were muted, / Their killers disregarding all law.  
The slaughter of innocents of one race,/ By another defying unity.  
They suffered for country’s grace,/ And to their blessed memories great compassion, greatest pity.

Similarly, the themes, characterization and stylistic concerns developed in the novels were first used in the drama *For Love of Biafra*:

I think the play was my very first approach to a subject that I have always wanted to write about. I then wrote the short story years later, when I felt I was almost ready to start the novel. The novel doesn’t have the one-family focus of the play, and there is a greater male presence in it: two thirds of the novel are told from the points of view of men, one Nigerian and the other English.<sup>57</sup>

The story of Adaobi, the ideological Biafran that anticipates the equally hyper-active pro-Biafran Olanna, and of her sweetheart, Mohammed, will be reconstructed in that of Olanna and Mohammed in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. In *For Love of Biafra*, the Mohammed that Adaobi was considering eloping with, but who she will reject later, is described as a trusted friend, a well educated and perfect gentleman. It is the same type of sensitive and accomplished man that we encounter in the portrait of Mohammed in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, the one who will save Olanna during the turbulence in Kano

55 'Per Contra Interviews: Miriam N. Kotzin with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie', Per Contra, Spring 2006

56 Akubuiro, Henry, 'Digging into the Palimpsest'

57 'Per Contra Interviews: Miriam N. Kotzin with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie'

but who would equally be rejected like his predecessor. In the same way, Harish, the Biafran loving Indian, becomes Richard, the British researcher in the novel, although, unlike Harish, Richard understands and speaks Igbo and considers himself a Biafran the way Harish could not have. Moreover, we encounter twins in both writings, Ebuka and Adaobi and, respectively, Olanna and Kainene and the places mentioned in the drama, Abba and Umannachi, will be later found in both Adichie's novels.<sup>58</sup>

The notion of saboteurs that we read about in a very defamatory way in *Half of a Yellow Sun* is anticipated in Adichie's *For Love of Biafra*. In both her writings Adichie points out that often people label saboteurs in order to destroy them. In the drama, for example, Papa Nduka protests about how "our fellow Biafrans who are not Ibos are being molested, tortured, even killed by overzealous Igbos who suspect them of collaboration with the federal troops" and Okoloma justifies the killings and cautions Papa Nduka "not to air these views of yours in public [since] you do not know who will label you a saboteur". It is the pathetic scenarios that Papa Nduka alludes to in *For Love of Biafra* that we witness in the scene involving refugees from Ndoni in *Half of a Yellow Sun*: "A group of militia members holding machetes were pushing two women along. They cried as they staggered down the road; their eyes reddened, what did we do? We are not saboteurs! we are refugees from Ndoni! We are refuges from Ndoni! We have done nothing! Pastor Ambrose ran out to the road and began to pray. 'Father God, destroy the saboteurs that are showing the enemy the way!'"<sup>59</sup> The discussion of saboteur is dealt with in *Half of a Yellow Sun* in a more elaborate way. Conversations such as that between Olanna and Mrs Muokelu on Alice's profile predominate. And Mama Oji's affirmation that "they should burn every single saboteur" (p.337) recalls Okoloma's demand that the so-called saboteurs "deserve to be punished, it is they who are prolonging this war".<sup>60</sup>

The role of Caritas is stressed out both in the drama and in the novel. In *For Love of Biafra*,

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58 Akubuiro, Henry, 'Digging into the Palimpsest'

59 Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Harper Perennial, 2007, p. 377

60 Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi, *For Love of Biafra*, Ibadan: Spectrum Books, 1998, p. 63

both Mama Ona and Adaobi talk about the role of organizations in handling the problem of hunger during the war: “I wonder what would have been the fate of our people, especially the young children, if not for the activities of caritas and the world council of churches, distributing food through relief centres, churches and hospitals. I have realized that there are really some of the white people who have hearts.” What Adaobi’s says in Act 3 scene iv of *For Love of Biafra* is reproduced in Adichie’s short story “Half of a Yellow Sun” and re-proposed in the novel, leading to the reverential song to Caritas in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, namely “Caritas, thank you, / Caritas si anyi taba okporoko/na kwashiorkor ga-anaa”(p.283).

The short story “Half of a Yellow Sun” has more in common with the novel than merely the title. Adichie declares that the short story was “really a way of taking small steps, taking a giant issue piecemeal”,<sup>61</sup> and that the novel is quite different from the story because the characters are different, the approach to the work is different and the scope is so much bigger. Dealing with the same historical period, that of Biafra’s secession from Nigeria in the late 1960s, the short story is a young Igbo woman's painful personal account of survival. It is easy to trace the same feeling of enthusiasm and hope at the beginning of both writings that gradually weakens and by the end becomes desperation and realization of loss. Similarly the narrator and her family are forced to flee their home, the same university town of Nsukka, settle in a hut surrounded by other refugees and fight starvation. While her fiancé, Nmandi, leaves to join the army, the narrator and her brother teach the children of the refugee camp lessons of history and maths.

Speaking about the novel in one of her interviews, Adichie declared that she intended to make Baby die towards the end but she couldn't bring herself to do it so she made Kainene disappear instead. In the short story though, Obi, the narrator's young brother, becomes seriously ill. His death and the bombing of the refugee camp, force the narrator to acknowledge that the war and the dream of an independent Biafra are definitely lost.

Each section of the short story is accompanied by an Igbo saying – such as “the maker of

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61 Interview with Jenni Murray, Woman's Hour, BBC Radio Four, 17 March 2004

the lion does not let the lion eat grass” – and Igbo words are interspersed throughout the text helping the reader enter a world still largely unknown aside from media images of children with bloated bellies. Adichie starts already to master the use of detail and imagery that enables her to transform a story from a mere account to an intimate look at a young woman’s very human experience. When the narrator and Nnamdi make love on his brief military leave, she wishes “in a twisted way that the war would never end so that it would have this quality, this quality of nutmeg, tart and lasting”.<sup>62</sup> And speaking of her hometown, she argues that “the air in Enugu smelled of rain and fresh grass and hope and new anthills”.

Adichie puts a lot of anger in the short story, but when she came to write the novel, some of the anger had been reduced and she managed to write it with a degree of detachment. “In the short story I was much closer to things”, she says. “I was more heartbroken. But by the time I came to the novel I had realised that for fiction to be really successful, you have to be a few steps removed. My book has Biafran sympathies, but I recognise that Biafra wasn't perfect”.

The six Nigeria-based stories in *The Thing Around Your Neck* deal with political upheaval and private loss. The ghost of the Biafra war returns in “Ghosts”, the only story with a male protagonist in which Professor Nwoye, a retired math professor must confront a former colleague, presumed dead, who had fled Nigeria during the Biafran conflict. Their conversation gives the occasion for the professor to recall the many changes that have taken place since, the government's betrayal, the loss of dreams and also the loss of the professor's own wife due to the use of fake medicine, and of his first daughter during the war. It seems that even many years after the war, its ghosts continue to reappear, even the present is taken up by ghosts: the university system has become a ghost of its old self since it's unable to pay the pensions. The only relief is given by the ghost of his late wife who continues to 'visit'. It is a moving story that relates to the world Adichie created in *Half of a Yellow Sun*.

In “Chinasa”(2009), another short story that captures the Nigerian Civil war, the narrator's

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62 Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi, 'Half of a Yellow Sun', Zoetrope: All-Story 7.2, Summer 2003

first person voice belongs to a woman, a teacher who experienced the civil war at its worst, but fate seemed to protect her from anything that was life threatening. Following her encounter with Chinasa, a fifteen-year old orphan on whom the Biafran conflict took its toll, the narrator decides to teach her how to read and is impressed by her progress. Both characters will return to their respective hometowns at the end of the war and the narrator will meet Chinasa only many years later through a newspaper, from where she discovers that the young lady has achieved a lot and has been appointed the cabinet minister. If the narrator reminds us of Olanna who would also teach the children during the Biafran war, Chinasa follows a path similar to that of Ugwu, the illiterate houseboy who, by the end of the novel, reveals himself as the author of *The Book*.

The writer hopes, although it had been 40 years since the end of the war, that her novel will contribute in helping Nigerians come to terms with their past:

We don't learn about this in school. In Nigerian history we get to 1967 and just move straight on to 1970. For a lot of Nigerians this is really a work of history, and it's very gratifying for me to hear from Nigerians in particular - because, in the end, it is the opinion of Nigerians that matters most - who say, 'My parents lived through the war and nobody ever talked about it until your book appeared.'<sup>63</sup>

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63 Akubuiro, Henry, 'Digging into the Palimpsest'



## Chapter III

### The imaginative truth of *Half of a Yellow Sun*

In her essay, “African 'Authenticity' and the Biafran Experience,” Adichie enumerates the guidelines she used to create her novel:

“the problem with stereotypes, particularly in literature, is that one story can become the only story: stereotypes straightjacket our ability to think in complex ways”; “[I] wanted to avoid making Biafra a utopia-in-retrospect, which would have been disingenuous. It would have sullied the memories of all those who died”; and “I was [also] determined to make my novel about what I like to think of as the grittiness of being human.”<sup>1</sup>

Also, in her interviews, the writer declared:

There have been a lot of books written about the war, about the battles and battalions and that sort of thing. I wanted to write about ordinary human beings. Growing up I remember my parents would talk about the little things. My mother, for example, would be watching a film and see somebody playing the piano, and say, 'Oh, I had a piano before the war.' She talked about the plates she had. It was the little things like that that made me curious and made me start to read about that period and start asking people questions.<sup>2</sup>

#### 3.1 Humanity and history

The way in which Adichie deals with the rehistoricisation of the Biafran War in the novel can be described as an act of socio-political engagement to remember the violence of the conflict and to place its enduring trauma in historical perspective. To convey it, Adichie uses an original narrative structure and a distinctive mix of historical and ‘imaginative’ truths with fiction to offer a realistic description of the war.<sup>3</sup> The story is constructed around the many ways in which the war can shatter the lives of normal people whose names do not appear in any history book.<sup>4</sup>

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1 Nigerian literature, 'The danger of a single story'

2 'Adichie on knowledge quest', by Fritz Lanham, Houston Chronicle, 15 February 2008, p. 3

3 'Adichie on knowledge quest', by Fritz Lanham, p. 10

4 De Mey, Joke, 'The Intersection of History, Literature and Trauma', p. 13

### 3.1.1 Humanity

Adichie's approach contrasts with earlier fictional depictions of the war because she rarely contextualize historical background. When asked in an interview if she set out to change people's perception about Africa, Adichie confesses that:

It's not what I want to do. I think it's what my writing ends up doing in some ways. I really don't set out having someone else define my agenda in the sense that I don't look at what is happening in Africa and say 'I'm going to challenge that'. I just write the stories I know. And it just happens that the stories are not about the expected African topics. And even in writing about war, I am interested in human relationships and in love and in food. I'm not so much into the stereotype of the big man, bad African leader and the helpless people-that kind of very easy, one group is the killer and one group is the killed sort of thing.<sup>5</sup>

The war thus, for Adichie, takes a human scale and is presented through a limited, fragile human perspective. Even if she has a few 'real' people in the novel, such as Professor Ezeka, who's modelled on the Biafran leader Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, or the character Okeoma who is based on the Nigerian poet, Christopher Okigbo, the story is told through a record of episodes in the daily lives and relationships of people that reflect and are conditioned by public, political events.<sup>6</sup> The writer also adds: "I also wanted to explore class - the outsider and the insider - and how war changes all that".<sup>7</sup> She presents the war as a leveller, covering families in anonymity, both rich and poor, all scattered on the roads. For instance, the ultimate symbol of social class was a car that gave the very few who had it the privilege to quickly evacuate their families when their city was attacked. Yet the commandeering of cars by soldiers and the charred remains of burnt-out vehicles were a constant reminder that no condition is permanent.

The book opens before the war when middle-class life at Nsukka University is rich and full of revolutionary rhetoric and hope. The characters come from all classes. Kainene and Olanna, the twins of nouveau riche Igbo parents, represent many of the period's social contradictions: one a tough businesswoman, the other a free spirit. The houseboy Ugwu, moved directly from the village

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5 '6 Questions with... Author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie', Interview by Eric Volmers, Calgary Herald, 21 June 2009, p. C4

6 'Memory, Witness, and War: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie Talks with Bookforum', Bookforum 14.4 (December 2007 - January 2008), p. 37

7 Akubuiro, Henry, 'Digging into the Palimpsest'

into the university town of Nsukka and strikes a contrast with the snobbish Professor Ezeka. There is Odenigbo's mother, a practitioner of traditional magic; Harrison, a misguided gardener obsessed about pleasing nonexistent colonial masters; good British, bad British; Muslim playboys and ignorant Americans.<sup>8</sup> The narrative focus shifts between Ugwu, the houseboy of Odenigbo, the revolutionary mathematician; Olanna, the woman who becomes Odenigbo's wife; and Richard, an English ex-pat who falls in love with Nigerian art and then with Kainene, Olanna's twin sister. At first the story builds up more like a soap opera, with betrayals, troublesome parents, familial disputes and lot of humour around Odenigbo's pretentiousness, Ugwu's attempts to reconcile his village upbringing with life on campus, Olanna's ability to make everyone fall in love with her and Richard's impotence.<sup>9</sup> All the characters have their weaknesses and Adichie uses their shortcomings to make them seem more real and thus more lovable: Ugwu does not know enough; Olanna, beautiful and educated, knows sometimes too much and, while visiting her relatives in Kano, she is ashamed to feel crossed by their poverty, tries not to mind the cockroach eggs and the smoke; Richard is white and British and struggles with the general perception of his strangeness and his desire to belong to Biafran society. Adichie also has also a satirical edge and she takes pleasure in describing Olanna's wealthy mother who hid her diamonds inside her bra and who will be one of the first to flee when the war started: “your father and I have finalized our plans. We have paid somebody who will take us to Cameroon and get us on a flight from there to London”.<sup>10</sup> So when their world is blown apart, it really is terrifying. There is no character, except for Olanna's parents, whose life is not in danger. The reader feels the horror brought by the massacres, the panic, the children who starve and die through the eyes of Adichie's frightened characters. Adichie is capable of making the reader aware of the tragedy behind the statistics and remember that each of those millions people who died were human beings capable of love, hate and everything in between.<sup>11</sup>

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8 Stacey, Daniel, 'Imagined truths of a troubled landscape', *Australian*, 21 October 2006, p. 10

9 Jordison, Sam, 'Guardian Book Club: Half of a Yellow Sun', *Guardian [Books Blog]*, 12 October 2009

10 Kellaway, Kate, 'It's off to war she goes', *Observer*, 13 August 2006, p. 22

11 Jordison, Sam, 'Guardian Book Club: Half of a Yellow Sun', *Guardian [Books Blog]*, 12 October 2009

Furthermore, by shifting the action back and forth between the peaceful early 1960s and the gory late 1960s, Adichie stresses the characterization of her protagonists as sympathetic human beings and reminds the reader by flashing back to better days “that these are people who had real, full lives and betrayed each other and laughed”. The book becomes, therefore, a book about pain but also a book about joy. The conflict, for the most part, is kept in the margins and, except for the scene in which Ugwu is conscripted at gunpoint, it is not seen up close. Instead, Adichie dramatises the characters' struggle to survive in Biafra in the face of bombing raids, starvation and the constant threat of being invaded by Nigerian vandals. Atrocity is ever-present, included not for the love of shocking images but simply because such horrors happened.

All the main characters in the novel have to find their own way to deal with the traumatic consequences of the horrors suffered during the war and some of the terrible experiences change them significantly. Olanna, for example, witnesses the massacre of her close relatives in Kano. These events and images will haunt her and she will not be able to walk for a while. Richard also witnesses the brutal murder of a young Igbo man at an airport, an experience that will help him feel closer to Igbo people and further the development of his role as a witness for Biafra. Finally Ugwu, after being traumatized by the experience of fighting in the war, faces a trauma of his own doing when he lets himself be convinced to participate in a gang-rape.<sup>12</sup>

Along with the main protagonists' trauma, the novel provides fragments of the disintegration of a nation and descent into chaos: people by the roadside, starving, sick, yet unable to buy medicines; families torn apart; feeding centers and improvised hospitals, petrol rationing, planes bringing relief food. The life during the war revolves around air raids, “the clatter of gunfire and the boom of mortars” (p.366). The loss of daily routines and duties leads the story towards a focus on tiny details and ordinary objects, comforts previously taken for granted or trivial moments that occupy a disproportionate place. Food rationing and preparation are in the spotlight. The description of starvation is so vivid that, when Olanna queues for powdered egg for Baby, her sick baby

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12 De Mey, Joke, 'The Intersection of History, Literature and Trauma', p. 47

daughter, the reader is in the crowd too, fighting with her.<sup>13</sup> He/she feel Olanna's terror as her little daughter's hair falls out in wooly clumps when she combs it, and her relief later as Baby's skin darkens again. Meanwhile, children all around her succumb to kwashiorkor, the disease of protein deficiency that blots their bellies, makes the skin pale and the hair reddish. Amidst all this chaos, people still love and marry, struggle to adjust to the change of pace and maintain the appearance of some sort of normality.<sup>14</sup> The writer believes that human beings are impressive because they will try extremely hard to remain human even when terrible things happen, and she's amazed at "how much our hearts can absorb".<sup>15</sup>

Ironically enough, the more the Biafran War becomes a moment in political history, the less important either politics or history become to Odenigbo, Olanna, Ugwu and the other Biafrans. The only "facts" that have any importance are those that help them survive on a daily basis: hunger, fear, suspicion. The end of the war with all its ideological and historical importance, doesn't have other meaning for Olanna than the fact that she can go and search for Kainene, lost behind enemy lines.

### 3.1.2 History

*Half of a Yellow Sun* has been labelled as a historical novel since the historical facts of the Biafran war form the basis of the story Adichie tells in her novel. Given that the past cannot be accessed and rendered objectively and that we cannot talk about history but only about histories since there are as many versions and re-writings of the past as there are historical discourses, the author provides the reader with a complex historical world in which, through the story and the way it is structured, her vision of the past events emerges.

The period in which the novel was written and published, Nigerian politics were still profoundly influenced by ethnic divisions as a result of the colonialism and its aftermath of ethnic

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13 Kellaway, Kate, 'It's off to war she goes', *Observer*, 13 August 2006, p. 22

14 Ugochukwu, Françoise, 'A Lingering Nightmare: Achebe, Ofoegbu and Adichie on Biafra', *Matatu* 39 (2011), pp. 253-272, p. 244

15 'Young Nigerian's Powerful New Novel', *BBC Learning English: BBC World Service*, 6 October 2006

conflicts. Therefore the novel can be read as a response and contribution to the contestations in progress as well as Adichie's literary proof that "Nigerian identity is burdensome". Adichie doesn't conceal her socio-political commitment and refers to her approach to the historicisation of the conflict as being sustained by "unapologetic Biafran sympathies". It is enough to take a look at the reading list on Biafran literature that she attaches at the end of the narrative to notice the large intertextual bibliography *Half of the Yellow Sun* is indebted to.<sup>16</sup> As the writer herself declares, the first copy of the book was more of a heavy proof of her extensive research that she rewrote till it become the character-centred novel it is today<sup>17</sup>:

I think the first draft was about me showing how much I had learnt. Did you know that the French government did that? Oh my goodness, did you know what the Americans did? And I had all these things in the book and it wasn't a novel. I often joke and I tell my friends, that I should write another book called, 'This is What I Found Out About Biafra'.

Indeed, together with the testimony of her parents' stories which "formed the backbone of my research", the writer acknowledges more than thirty books that "helped in [her] research". For the most part there are histories or political studies, but the list also includes almost a dozen works of fiction from Chinua Achebe's *Girls at War and Other Stories* (1972) to Nwapa's *Wives at War* (1984) and Anthonia Kalu's *Broken Lives and Other Stories* (2003). Most of the novels are written by Igbo writers due to the fact that writing Biafran war fiction is mainly an Igbo tradition and it is to this tradition that Adichie responds through her novel.<sup>18</sup>

As for the "unapologetic Biafran sympathies", critics have indeed identified in her novel the tendency to offer an oversimplified representation or an erasure of the non-Igbo minorities, despite the fact that they suffered attacks from both sides during the Biafran war and that they occupy a large area of the Eastern Region, including Port Harcourt, as well as the crucial area around the national capital, Lagos, where some of the decisive battles were fought. Nonetheless, this misrepresentation indicates that the historicisation in the novel takes an unwavering Igbo

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16 Akpome, Aghogho, 'Narrating a New Nationalism: Exploring the Ideological and Stylistic Influence of Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987) on Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006)', p. 13

17 Daniel, Smriti, 'Chimamanda: Tougher than she looks!', *Sunday Times* (Sri Lanka), 30 January 2011

18 Hodges, Hugh, 'Writing Biafra: Adichie, Emecheta and the Dilemmas of Biafran War Fiction'

perspective on the war, and that the writer aims only at evoking empathy for the violent events that marked the collective Igbo experience.<sup>19</sup>

It has also been argued that the rich description of the grim scenes and violent acts in *Half of a Yellow Sun* reinforces Western stereotypical misrepresentations of Africa as “heart of darkness”, that they contribute to the so-called ‘pornography of violence’.<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, other critics pointed out that the description of horrors and the resulting trauma represents Adichie's way to ‘write back’ at earlier representations of the war in new ways, it connects the war to the colonial period, stressing the ethnic divisions created by the western world and criticising its complicity in the Biafran war.<sup>21</sup>

The author's method of historicisation in the novel is to organize trivial details of the story around some of the key events of the war. She uses personal events to convey political ideas and, by combining them, she makes the characters feel the political developments as part of their personal history. Adichie mentions the January 1966 coup: “‘Nkem!’ Master called out. ‘Omego! It has happened!’ [...] Master was standing by the radio. The television was on but the volume was off so that the dancing people looked as if they were swaying drunkenly. ‘There’s been a coup’” (p.123). She speaks of the killing of Igbo people in the North: “After Baby fell asleep, Olanna told Odenigbo what she had seen” (p.156); the countercoup in July: “Ikejide came up to him. ‘Mr Richard, sah! Madam say make you come. There is another coup,’ Ikejide said. He looked excited. Richard hurried indoors. He was right; Madu was wrong” (p.137); she refers to the declaration of secession: “But Odenigbo didn’t need to deliver the letter because the secession was announced that evening. He sat on the bed with the radio placed on the bedside cabinet. [...] Ojukwu’s voice was unmistakable; it was vibrantly male, charismatic, smooth” (p.161); and the consequent war: “Odenigbo climbed up to the podium waving his Biafran flag: swaths of red, black, and green and, at the centre, a luminous half of a yellow sun. ‘Biafra is born! We will lead Black Africa! We will

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19 Akpome, Aghogho, 'Narrating a New Nationalism', p. 116

20 Cosic, Miriam, 'Fresh Nigerian voice speaks of "horrible things"', Australian, 20 May 2009, p. 6

21 Akpome, Aghogho, 'Narrating a New Nationalism', p. 39

live in security! Nobody will ever again attack us! Never again!” (p.163). Finally, Olanna's and Odenigbo's wedding is also the moment of the first bombing of the town of Umuahia and these two events will always be remembered together: “Ugwu heard the sound just before they cut their cake in the living room, the swift wah-wah-wah roar in the sky” (p.202).

The author is not interested in fictionalizing events that do not correspond to historical facts, such as the dialogue between two political leaders, only in rendering the characters' point of view and the information available to them through the radio or during their intellectual encounter. Similarly, the use of newspapers or other media as paratexts for the blending of the historical events into the fictional world of the novel helps enhancing the sense of realism of the story and provides political context.<sup>22</sup>

Likewise, Adichie does not mention the date in which Biafra became an independent republic, but only the characters' reaction to the secession when the republic of Biafra is proclaimed, since the ways in which each one of them experience the event and react to it is more relevant than the event itself: “But Odenigbo didn't need to deliver the letter because the secession was announced that evening” (p.161), “‘This is our beginning,’ Odenigbo said. ... She [Olanna] had wanted the secession to happen, but now it seemed too big to conceive” (p.162).<sup>23</sup>

Another way of marking the time in the novel is the division of the events in two major time periods: the early sixties and the late sixties. The shift in time and perspective helps juxtaposing the remote or immediate causes of the war with its direct effects both at a large public scale and on private lives and thus helps questioning the multiple political and ideological issues that the war presents. The novel begins in the early sixties, but Adichie does never provide an exact date afterwards since real people do not think or remember in terms of precise dates. However, one can deduce the exact date from the historical events that are connected with the characters' life: the independence of Kenya on 12 December 1963 (“They toasted Kenya's independence” (p. 233)), the

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22 Akpome, Aghogho, 'Narrating a New Nationalism', p. 90

23 De Mey, Joke, 'The Intersection of History, Literature and Trauma', p. 22

death of Winston Churchill on 24 January 1965 (“Richard was almost relieved to learn of Sir Winston Churchill's death” (p. 235)).<sup>24</sup>

The writer manages also to create a historical support to her fictional world by making Ugwu observe Odenigbo’s obsession with international politics and register some of his Africanist and anti-Western views. Thus, Odenigbo's blame on the United States and Belgium for the killing of Congo’s former Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba constitutes one of Adichie's ways of providing realist historicisation to her story. She accompanies the description of the various episodes of the war with ideological and political interpretations of the main issues through the consciousness of the characters, through the intellectual discussions Odenigbo and his friends have often at his house and through the explicit metatext offered in the Book. The writer explicitly exposes through these conversations the political orientation of the novel’s historiographical mission. Such an example is the scene in which the coup of January 1966 is being discussed<sup>25</sup>:

'The BBC is calling it an Igbo coup,' [someone] said. 'And they have a point. It was mostly Northerners who were killed.' 'It was mostly Northerners who were in government,' Professor Ezeka whispered, his eyebrows arched, as if he could not believe what was so obvious. 'The BBC should be asking their people who put the Northerners in government to dominate everybody!' [Odenigbo] said. Ugwu was surprised that Master and Professor Ezeka seemed to agree. (p.125)

Another example is found in the reaction the poet Okeoma had after the killing of Igbo people in the north, when he comments about the recall of the British ambassador to Nigeria: “‘Why is he coming to tell us how to put out a fire, when it is he and his fellow British who collected the firewood for it in the first place?’” (p.158) Odenigbo offers also his ideas about peace and secession: “‘Secession is the only answer. If Gowon wanted to keep this country united, he would have done something long ago’”(p.186). And finally, Richard considers the secession as an appropriate historical moment for proposing to Kainene, because “his was a new start [...] not only because secession was just, considering all that the Igbo had endured, but because of the possibility Biafra held for him” (p.168). In this way, Adichie conveys through three different points of view what she thinks about

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24 De Mey, Joke, 'The Intersection of History, Literature and Trauma', p. 22

25 Akpome, Aghogho, 'Narrating a New Nationalism', p.114

Biafra's involvement in the war and what this new nation represented for its citizens: a promise of social, political and cultural fulfilment. The background of these arguments is the negative consequence of Great Britain's divide and rule policy.<sup>26</sup> Each character interprets the reality the way he perceives it so there are as many versions of the same period of time as there are characters.

Another way of conveying what she thinks about Biafra's involvement in the war is through the Book "The World Was Silent When We Died", the title of which is already a criticism to the role of the West in the conflict. The Book is one of the key instruments that Adichie uses to talk about the war. It is a metatext divided in eight parts which offers more explicit historical information and historical verifiable facts. Moreover, the line of reasoning expressed in the Book provides the basis for analysing and interpreting the characters' political views in the main narrative, and affirms or reinforces the major ideas of these characters. The key historical events cover the two military coups of 1966, the subsequent massacres of Igbo people in different parts of the country, the declaration of secession by the Igbo-dominated Eastern Region and the resulting war. It also includes anecdotes from the events in the narrative as, for example, the section of the novel that narrates the two coups and the Igbo massacre in 1966 is introduced by the second instalment of "The Book" in which are discussed the 1914 amalgamation of Northern and Southern Nigeria and the beginnings of ethnic rivalry. Structurally, the metatext provides an alternative method of flashback that gives background information about Nigeria's history without impeding the flow of action. As in the main narrative, Adichie used in the metatext the same realist technique of blending factual and fictional details: in the Book she mentions the episode of the head in the calabash that will appear in the narrative.<sup>27</sup>

By trying to fictionalize an historical event, the writer is also obliged to chose what to represent and what to erase and this selection might elude significant historical episodes or engage with unresolved issues.<sup>28</sup> There are, therefore, gaps and erasures in Adichie's historicisation. She

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26 Akpome, Aghogho, 'Narrating a New Nationalism', p. 119

27 Akpome, Aghogho, 'Narrating a New Nationalism', p. 114

28 Akpome, Aghogho, 'Narrating a New Nationalism', p. 111

decides not to mention the ethnic composition of the Igbo coup plotters, despite the fact that this issue is central to the several writings dealing with the historicisation of the Biafran war and its aftermath, and that it offers the scaffolding for all the other prevalent arguments that stated that the killing of Igbo in the north and the countercoup of July 1966 were in fact counter-attacks that went out of hand.<sup>29</sup> Also, she does not mention the violent February 1966 secessionist attempt by minority militias to create a Niger Delta Republic despite the fact that the oil was found in that area of the country and that, Adichie believes, Biafra would have been an independent country today hadn't it been for the Niger delta with its oil.

Another aspect that Adichie kept under silence is the importance of the role the discovery of oil played in deciding the course of the war and the allegiance of the international community. The oil is mentioned in the novel, but only in a superficial way and only after the war has effectively begun:

Richard was surprised when he heard the announcement that the federal government had declared a police action to bring the rebels to order. Kainene was not. 'It's the oil,' she said. 'They can't let us go easily with all that oil. But the war will be brief. Madu says Ojukwu has big plans. He suggested I donate some foreign exchange to the war cabinet, so that when this ends, I'll get any contract I bid for'. (p.180)

Only when Port Harcourt with its refineries was about to fall in the hands of federal forces the importance of the oil comes forth. Introducing a paratext, Adichie manages to offer a piece of historical information but re-orders the events transforming into a consequence what at the time was perceived as a cause: "They had been talking about the fall of Port Harcourt for the past two days. So had Lagos radio, although with a little less glee. The BBC, too, had announced that the imminent fall of Port Harcourt was the fall of Biafra; Biafra would lose its viable seaport, its airport, its control of oil" (p.304).

Adichie mentions also real places, plausible even in the historical context, since they were important in the course of events during the war, but again they are mentioned only because the

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29 Akpome, Aghogho, 'Narrating a New Nationalism', p. 115

characters relate in one way or the other to them. Odenigbo and Olanna work at the beginning at the university in Nsukka, but have to flee from Nsukka to Abba, Odenigbo's ancestral home; then Umuahia which became capital after the fall of Enugu; Ulli, where a landing strip was built after the fall of Port Harcourt; and finally to Orlu. Port Harcourt, a very important city, the fall of which was significant in the war, is mentioned because Richard and Kainene live there. The street on which Odenigbo and Olanna live, Odim street, is a street that actually exists near the university in Nsukka. Adichie explains how she dealt with the geography in her novel: "I invented a train station in Nsukka, invented a beach in Port Harcourt, changed the distance between towns... but I did not invent any of the major events". By treating the geographic elements loosely, Adichie manages to keep the characters' experiences in the real world while using freely the surroundings for the development of her characters. She maintains the names of important historical figures, such as Gowon and Ojuwku or Harold Wilson, the British prime minister at the time.<sup>30</sup>

### 3.2 The lack of closure

The gaps and erasures Adichie uses render the historicisation in the novel imperfect and it is because of them that her book can be called a successful historical novel. Through the shortcomings, the novel "dramatises its own incompleteness, its inability to comprehend fully the Biafran War",<sup>31</sup> and, as a result, "negotiates the dilemmas implicit in fictionalizing war more successfully than most of its predecessors".<sup>32</sup> Therefore, not all the events and issues connected to the war are being rationalised, some of them are left without explanation, resolution or closure. Maybe the best example can be found in the self-reflexive comment in the fourth section of "The Book":

He gestures to complex problems facing the new country but focuses on the 1966 massacres.

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30 Akpome, Aghogho, 'Narrating a New Nationalism', p. 23

31 Hodges, Hugh, 'Writing Biafra: Adichie, Emecheta and the Dilemmas of Biafran War Fiction', p. 15

32 Hodges, Hugh, 'Writing Biafra: Adichie, Emecheta and the Dilemmas of Biafran War Fiction', p. 15

The ostensible reasons – revenge for the ‘Igbo coup’, protest against a unitary decree that would make Northerners lose out in the civil service – did not matter. Nor did the varying numbers of the dead: three thousand, ten thousand, fifty thousand. What mattered was that the massacres frightened and united the Igbo. What mattered was that the massacres made fervent Biafrans of former Nigerians. (p.205)

The author of the metatext implies here that there is no full logical explanation for the Igbo actions that led up to the war. He renounces to the responsibility of offering such a rational clarification and gives instead only an account of the effect of the random killing of innocent Igbo: how they gave up the Nigerian nation and decided to fight for a Biafran one as the only means of survival.<sup>33</sup>

Furthermore, critics have pointed out that the search for closure is a key element in the structure of most of the war novels. It is a structure marked by six steps: “confidence and high hopes”; “intimations that all might not go well”; “ups and downs of wartime”; “increasing despair, chaos, death, and horror”; “the death of someone who is educated, wise, or otherwise highly valued”; and, finally “survival plus disillusionment”.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, deviates significantly from this structure and, in doing so, offers maybe a solution to the genre’s central issue. The novel seems to follow closely the above framework, but it introduces a significant change at the fifth step: nobody educated, wise or highly valued dies. Adichie replaces the death with a disappearance: Kainene, Olanna’s sister and Richard’s lover, goes in search for food for the refugees behind enemy lines and doesn't come back. While her death would have been final, her disappearance offers no solution and receives no explanation till the end. Therefore, there is no closing for the book, the novel's last act being towards a book yet to be opened, Ugwu’s *The World Was Silent When We Died*.<sup>35</sup> *Half of a Yellow Sun*, thus, rejects the possibility of a total assessment not only because on human scale there can be no total assessment of the war but also because the heritage of the Biafran War, and of the colonial rule before that, continues to shape Nigerian politics.

The end of the war doesn't have other meaning for Olanna than the fact that she is free to

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33 Akpome, Aghogho, 'Narrating a New Nationalism', p. 119

34 Akpome, Aghogho, 'Narrating a New Nationalism', p. 120

35 Hodges, Hugh, 'Writing Biafra: Adichie, Emecheta and the Dilemmas of Biafran War Fiction', p. 10

start searching for Kainene. In the text, this moment of culmination is followed literally by a blank space, and then by: “A week passed. A Red Cross van arrived at the refugee camp and two women handed out cups of milk” (p.412).<sup>36</sup> It seems that the Biafran War is still going on and that eastern Nigeria is still inhabiting that blank space that follows the declaration of peace in the novel, still uncertain whether it has survived or what survival might mean. Kainene's vanishing inscribes itself in the same historical incompleteness of the book and lack of closure for the rehistoricisation of the war. The meaning of her name itself (“what will the future bring”), as well as the half of a yellow sun motif on the Biafran flag and Olanna’s final assertion of belief in reincarnation may symbolise the impossibility to offer such closure.<sup>37</sup>

Thus, by writing down these traumatic memories, Adichie marked her novel as “an act of remembering”. As she asserts: “I don’t believe in the concept of closure. I think that the traumas we have experienced remain an indelible part of who we are; we carry it with us always”.<sup>38</sup>

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36 Hodges, Hugh, 'Writing Biafra: Adichie, Emecheta and the Dilemmas of Biafran War Fiction', p. 6

37 Akpome, Aghogho, 'Narrating a New Nationalism', p. 120

38 Hevešiová, Simona 'A story to be remembered: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s Half of a Yellow Sun' in: Silesian studies in English 2009: Proceedings of the international conference of English and American Studies, Opava 7-8 September 2009

## Chapter IV

### A balance of stories

*Half of a Yellow Sun* contends with a mix of several different stories and different narrators, the emphasis being on the diversity of African experience. Adichie brings to life characters belonging to a different gender or race, different classes, with different points of view, but united in their fight for Biafra. In her essay “African 'Authenticity' and the Biafran Experience” the writer claims that Africa is a multidimensional landscape and we cannot define it in one unique way: “I do not accept the idea of monolithic authenticity. To insist that there is one thing that is authentically African is to diminish the African experience”.<sup>1</sup> On another occasion, she states that she is always keen to represent the multiplicity and the common humanity beyond the appearances:

I find it kind of exhausting how Africa is always this basket case of chaos and war and starvation. If you depended on the American media for a portrayal of Africa, you would end up thinking, 'These people are so stupid, how do they get themselves into these things?' One thing that never pushes through is a view of Africans as entirely human.<sup>2</sup>

Adichie's world, therefore, escapes definition and is full with parallels and paradoxes: bush people, London-educated intellectuals and activists, servile but witty houseboys, sly politicians and strangers with stereotyped images of Africa in mind.<sup>3</sup> She insists in presenting both privileged, middle-class characters and characters belonging to the peasantry because she believes it's important to show the differences created by class in Biafra. The writer's interest in class comes as a response to the stereotyped view of Africa. There were of course Biafrans who had absolutely nothing and watched their children starve to death, but there were also people who could afford to leave because they had money or people who could afford to eat during the war<sup>4</sup>: “Even at times of

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1 De Mey, Joke, 'The Intersection of History, Literature and Trauma', p. 20

2 'Half of a Yellow Sun: An up-and-coming Nigerian author revisits the war that shaped her country', Interview with Rina Palta, Mother Jones, 24 October 2006

3 Ghoshal, Somak, 'The African Writer and the Burden of History', Telegraph (India), 10 August 2007

4 Lanham, Fritz, 'Adichie on knowledge quest', Houston Chronicle, 15 February 2008, p. 3

great crisis, class still determines what happens. In the Biafran army officers had good food, uniforms and entertainment while the men had no uniforms and perhaps just one meal a day”.<sup>5</sup>

#### 4.1 Questions of representation

The novel begins with the confident, passionate university professor Odenigbo who rages against the damage the British inflicted on Nigeria. He's surrounded by a large circle of characters, three of whom we get to know well, since it's from their points of view we follow the story. The narrators are Ugwu, the eager village boy whom Odenigbo took as a houseboy just before the start of the conflict; Olanna, the professor's girlfriend, a beautiful, wealthy, well-educated but insecure woman; and the idealistic and sympathetic Richard, the only white main character, an English man in love with Olanna's twin sister, Kainene, a strong business woman. Throughout the novel, Ugwu metamorphoses from a simple teenager who barely knows how to read and write to an informed young adult writer. In the same way, the two main female characters, Olanna and Kainene, move from a marginal position of the political discourse to a position where the traumatic experiences suffered by one as well as the courage and sacrifice of the other become personifications of the reason for which the war was fought.<sup>6</sup> The family connection between Olanna and Kainene on the one hand, and the love relationship between Olanna and Odenigbo on the other, is the nexus of all the other relationships around which the story develops. The novel is, in a way, the story of Olanna's trauma deriving directly from the events that she personally experiences and every key event is structured so as to lead, in a way, or another, to Olanna or her traumatic experience. Ugwu is as important as Olanna in the story as a narrator but his role is more limited in terms of action, except for his participation to the war effort towards the end, he's more of an observer. Richard's part of the novel is more contemplative, the Englishman's focus being mainly the Igbo-Ukwu art

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5 Kimber, Charles, 'Interview: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie', *Socialist Review*, October 2006

6 Akpome, Aghogho, 'Narrating a New Nationalism', p. 81

and his love for Kainene.<sup>7</sup>

The key characters who present the events from their point of view and thus narrativize their life can be seen as focalisers through whom the reader may access different meanings and layered representations. The different perspectives are so skilfully interwoven that each character's narrative becomes dependent on the other characters to reveal its full meaning. Adichie describes herself “suspicious of the omniscient narrative” and presents her characters as follows: “I wanted to write characters who are driven by impulses that they may not always be consciously aware of, which I think is true for us human beings”.<sup>8</sup> The focalisers, by selecting which action and from which angle to present it, and bringing their own cognitive, psychological and ideological tendencies into the story, influence the way the content is perceived by the reader. Most part of the story is told through the eyes of the focalisers who tend to interfere with the interpretation of information, de-centring thus the narrative voice. It has been argued that *Half of a Yellow Sun* employs both ‘direct’ and ‘indirect’ focalisers: Ugwu, Olanna and Richard are direct or primary focalisers and Odenigbo and, to a lesser degree, Kainene are indirect or secondary focalisers.<sup>9</sup> The direct focalisers function almost as a traditional third-person narrator, but whose stream of the consciousness is recorded, each for each specific section of the story that is being told. As for the indirect focalisers, they exist not only because of their strong emotional connection with Olanna/Ugwu and Richard, respectively, but also because most of their expressed views and ideas are rendered through the direct focalisers. Odenigbo provides the ideological and political orientation of the story and his views are crucial for Ugwu’s intellectual growth.<sup>10</sup> The plot thus relies on uncertainties. Adichie's manipulation of points of view makes sure that the reader always knows about Olanna's thoughts, but not her husband's. Olanna is brought news that Ugwu, enlisted into the Biafran army, has been killed, and only later the reader finds out that he has survived. Richard, at the end of the novel, suspects a man of having

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7 Akpome, Aghogho, 'Narrating a New Nationalism', p. 91

8 Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi, “The Story Behind the Book”

9 Akpome, Aghogho, 'Narrating a New Nationalism', p. 132

10 Akpome, Aghogho, 'Narrating a New Nationalism', p. 133

slept with Kainene, but the reader doesn't know if his suspicions are justified. And Kainene's fate is uncertain to the reader, as it is to her lover and her sister.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, Adichie's choice of focalisation influences the novel's structure and characterisation: the points of view in *Half of a Yellow Sun* shift together with the chronology. She declared also that this peace-war peace-war pattern was chosen not only because the novel was very difficult emotionally to write, but also to remind herself of the humanity of these people. Since essentially the book isn't about war, but about about human beings, it's important to remember that these people going through such horrible times, once had such ordinary problems as “what are we going to eat?” and “Who's sleeping with whom?”.<sup>12</sup> The novel is organized in four parts and contains 37 chapters which are divided in equal numbers among the three main focalisers (Ugwu, Olanna and Richard). The first and third parts, called 'The Early Sixties', have six chapters each while the second and fourth, 'The Late Sixties,' have twelve and thirteen respectively. The chapters are alternatively told from one of the three main characters' point of view and follow a structural cyclical and almost symmetrical pattern. The prevailing sequence is that of Ugwu-Olanna-Richard that characterizes all the chapters belonging to Parts One and Three, 'The Early Sixties' (namely 1-6 and 19-24) and the first six chapters of Part Two, 'The Late Sixties' (namely 7-12). In Parts One and Three, Ugwu, Olanna and Richard are allocated two chapters each while in Parts Two and Four, each has four chapters with the exception of Olanna who has in addition the fifth, conclusive chapter. The remaining 6 chapters belonging to Part Two (i.e. 13-18) don't follow any particular order if not that of still allocating two chapters to each main character. But those are the chapters in which the traumatic experiences hit hard and, therefore, any pretence of order is lost: the Dark Swoops begin for Olanna, Richard realizes he's not able to write about the killings since his words are “too melodramatic” (p.168), secession is declared and Ugwu starts organizing the first of the many flights away from the federal troops. In Part Four the sequence changes to Olanna-Ugwu-

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11 Jordison, Sam, 'Guardian Book Club: Half of a Yellow Sun', Guardian [Books Blog]

12 Interview with Harriett Gilbert from World Book Club, BBC

Richard which repeats till the thirty-sixth chapter. Olanna has thus both the first and the last, thirty-seventh chapter in Part Four. Even if the final chapter is Olanna's, the last episode of "The Book", the last line belongs to Ugwu, who replaces Richard as the chronicler. Ugwu's parts are positioned strategically: he begins and finishes the novel and opens three of the four parts (in the last part he is second). The shifting pattern may also mean that Adichie is very careful to represent the plot and the characters from multiple points of view and to overturn any privilege that might come with occupying a specific position, thus offering a greater balance and a larger perspective among the different genders, races, social classes and generations. It has been argued too that the length of individual chapters may be connected to the roles the focalisers play in the narrative. For example, apart from Chapter Three which is the longest and Chapter Twenty-one which has only two pages, Richard's other chapters are shorter than the average and he occupies generally the smallest narrative space. This might be due to the fact that Richard is only a secondary witness whose role is to confirm and reinforce the records of primary eye-witnesses.<sup>13</sup>

The writer moves away from easily recognisable narrative conventions in several ways: she makes use of the anonymous third-person narrator who 'perceives' through the eyes of each of the main characters and, in doing so, she manages to provide rich personal versions of historical events. In order to inform the reader which chapter belongs to which character, Adichie starts the chapter with the narrator's name. The only exception is the first chapter that starts with 'Master' ("Master was a little crazy"), arguably a way to stress out Odenibgo's initial strong stance and Ugwu's subordination. The shift between different perceptions mirrors also movements between the village and the town and between the South and the North of Nigeria, resulting in parallelisms between the two and providing Adichie with a way to present class, ethnic and cultural differences.<sup>14</sup>

The symmetrical pattern and the multiplicity of perspectives are intensified by the introduction of eight episodes of "The Book". It is mainly a historical account of the period from

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13 Akpome, Aghogho, 'Narrating a New Nationalism', p. 85

14 Akpome, Aghogho, 'Narrating a New Nationalism', p. 84

the British colonization to the Nigeria-Biafra War, serially numbered and divided equally among the four parts. The metatext, printed with a different typeface, appears at the end of either one or two sequences of three chapters focalised by each of the three main focalisers (every one sequence in Part One and Three, and every two sequences in Part Two and Four). Therefore, it seems as a way to spread and reinforce the perspective. Unlike the focalisers' personalised perspectives, "The Book" with its omniscient extradiegetic narrator may offer a de-personalised point of view to counterbalance or reinforce the main characters' perspectives. The metatext is a third-person narrative told in the simple present tense and in chronological order and each instalment is added to the end of one of the chapters mentioned above, most of which belonging to Richard and thus giving the intentionally wrong idea that "The Book" and the book Richard is struggling to write throughout the novel are the same. The fourth instalment though is added to a chapter focalised through Ugwu to whom the writer will eventually, in the last instalment, confer the authorship. While the shifting from Richard to Ugwu can be interpreted to the awareness, on Richard's part, that telling the story of Biafra was more a responsibility of Ugwu than his, the last episode, following one of the chapters focalised through Olanna, might be attributed to the crucial role Olanna plays in the narrative.

There is a constant overlapping between the narrator, a primary focaliser in its own right, and the writer of "The Book". For example, in the first paragraph of the second instalment, the narrator is different from the writer: "He discusses the British soldier-merchant Taubman Goldie [...]" (p.115). For the remaining part of the instalment though, the narration offers a piece of information that clearly belongs to the narrator without giving any hint as to how this information has been accessed: "The British preferred the North" (p.115). In the first instalment it is also clear that the narrator has access to the information from the main narrative and might know more about the world in which the characters live, as he/she uses content from it in the metatext: Olanna's story of "the woman with the calabash" (p.82) appears in the prologue.<sup>15</sup> The narrative form changes in

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15 De Mey, Joke, 'The Intersection of History, Literature and Trauma', p. 28

the last two instalments. “The Book” includes also verses together with journalistic reportage and can be also interpreted as a means through which Adichie explores various literary ways in which the postcolonial historicisation can be shaped. The final instalment, consisting of only one line (“Ugwu writes his dedication last: For Master, my good man” (p.433)), might be interpreted as a postscript by which the author cleverly reveals the identity of the writer of the metatext on one hand, and which, reinforces the importance of Odenigbo’s ideological influence. Moreover, the metatext enables the narrator to renounce the right of speaking on behalf of the voiceless Biafrans, and to grant this privilege to Ugwu.<sup>16</sup>

## 4.2 Ugwu – the chronicler

Ugwu, Odenigbo's houseboy, has been shaped after Mellitus, an actual houseboy that Adichie's parents had and to whom the novel is dedicated, and is her favourite character. The writer claims that:

He was the easiest to write, so in some ways, he's the one I most identified with. He is so different from me, of course, the poor little houseboy, but he's the most inquisitive, the best observer, possibly the smartest. He's incredibly curious about the world and has a sense of humour. I really wanted him to be the soul of the book, the character that holds everyone together.<sup>17</sup>

A part from being her favourite, Ugwu, as a boy of barely thirteen, provides an alternative perspective on the Biafran conflict. Through Ugwu, the teenage soldier, Adichie manages to offer a multifaceted account of the war, presenting not only the Home Front as women writers are prone to do when dealing with the war theme, but also the War Front, theme that applies to men writers.<sup>18</sup>

The way that Ugwu is shaped and his relationship with Odenigbo raises also a class issue and comes as a response to the assumed impossibility of relations between different classes:

I’ve always been interested in class and questions about class.[...] People treat their drivers or their servants as if they were not really human. In this book I wanted to show the way class shapes lives.

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16 Akpome, Aghogho, 'Narrating a New Nationalism', p. 31

17 'Memory, Witness, and War: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie Talks with Bookforum', p. 37

18 Ouma, Christopher Ernest Werimo, 'Childhood in Contemporary Nigerian Fiction', p. 89

But I also wanted to point to the possibility of different relationships. So the book's radical Professor Odenigbo treats his houseboy as a person and with kindness. He has respect for him.<sup>19</sup>

Last but not least, the indigenous Nigerian Ugwu represents Adichie's stance regarding the rules of cross-cultural appropriation, and validates the author's own role as a writer showing the different ways in which history can be preserved: "When I read a book about Africa by a non-African, I'm very careful and oftentimes resentful because I think that people go into Africa and bend the reality of Africa to fit their preconceived notions",<sup>20</sup> and "I wanted to make a strongly-felt political point about who should be writing the stories of Africa".<sup>21</sup>

#### 4.2.1 The observer - Ugwu's perception of Odenigbo and Olanna

It can be argued that Ugwu is also the most important character in the novel, although there are fewer pages dedicated to him than to Olanna. His is the opening chapter of *Half of a Yellow Sun* and his are also three of the four chapters with which the four parts begin. Therefore, his consciousness and perception offers an interpretative introduction to the entire story and to each of the three parts. Moreover, his position is strategically situated, in between all the main characters, and this role invests him with the authority to offer an insight into the lives and thoughts of Olanna and Odenigbo especially, but also of their intellectual friends who visit often: Okeoma, Miss Adebayo, Dr. Patel, Professors Ezeaka or Lehman.<sup>22</sup> Despite being introduced only in the second paragraph, Ugwu's presence together with his own perception are obvious from the beginning:

Master was a little crazy; he had spent too many years reading books overseas, talked to himself in his office, did not always return greetings, and had too much hair. Ugwu's aunty said this in a low voice as they walked on the path. "But he is a good man," she added. "And as long as you work well, you will eat well. You will even eat meat every day." [...] Ugwu did not believe that anybody, not even this master he was going to live with, ate meat everyday. He did not disagree with his aunty, though, because he was too choked with expectation, too busy with imagining his new life away from the village. (p.3)

The words 'master' and 'aunty', used to designate Odenigbo and Ugwu's aunt, emphasize the

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19 Kimber, Charles, 'Interview: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie', *Socialist Review*

20 'Inappropriate Appropriation: A Believer Nighttime Event,' *PEN America 7: World Voices*

21 Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi, "The Story Behind the Book"

22 Akpome, Aghogho, 'Narrating a New Nationalism', p. 96

influence of the houseboy's consciousness over the story. Ugwu is the only one who calls Odenigbo 'master', and 'aunty' is the term usually used by a child addressing a relative or an older woman. The following paragraphs assert Ugwu's perspective over the unfolding story and offer unrestricted access to his thoughts or private deeds.

His aunty walked faster, her slippers making slap-slap sounds that echoed in the silent street. [...] They went past a sign, ODIM STREET, and Ugwu mouthed street, as he did whenever he saw an English word ... He smelt something sweet, heady, as they walked into a compound [...] They took off their slippers before walking in. Ugwu had never seen a room so wide. Despite the brown sofas arranged in a semicircle, the side tables between them, the shelves crammed with books, and the centre table with a vase of red and white flowers, the room still seemed to have too much space. [...]Ugwu entered the kitchen cautiously, placing one foot slowly after the other. When he saw the white thing, almost as tall as he was, he knew it was the fridge. (pp.3-6)

Odenigbo, by way of which Adichie blends her ideological stand into the story, is presented thus through Ugwu's focalisation. There are few main characters so every single primary focaliser is essential in portraying the other characters, especially in Ugwu's case, since his place in the story is determined mainly by his relationship with Odenigbo and Olanna. Odenigbo's description belongs undoubtedly to Ugwu:

Master sat in an armchair, wearing a singlet and a pair of shorts. He was not sitting upright but slanted, a book covering his face, as though oblivious that he had just asked people in. [...] Master looked up. His complexion was very dark, like old bark, and the hair that covered his chest and legs was a lustrous, darker shade. He pulled off his glasses. 'The child?' [...] Master's Igbo felt feathery in Ugwu's ears. It was Igbo coloured by the sliding sounds of English, the Igbo of one who spoke English often. (p.4)

By speaking of Odenigbo as 'master', Ugwu identifies him in terms of his position of superiority as employer and emphasizes the importance of Odenigbo to the narrative. Being very interested in class, Adichie creates a character who's acutely aware of the class difference between him and Odenigbo. Moreover, Ugwu's perception of Odenigbo is substantially sensorial and his description of his master's physical aspect is rendered through the senses of sight, sound and smell respectively. The houseboy is confronted from the beginning with historical discourses that he can only listen and watch bemused:

“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. (p.11)

But Ugwu is interested in Odenigbo's ideological views, so these ideas will play an important part in the novel. Adichie constructs, through the daily conversations of Odenigbo's intellectual circle, a discourse around ethnic and national identities. The houseboy notices soon enough Odenigbo's Africanist and anti-Western views: the revolutionary professor blames the United States and Belgium for the killing of Congo's former Prime Minister and questions the western knowledge when he points out that "the people who drew the [world map] decided to put their own land on top of ours", and that "[o]ur people fished in the Niger long before Mungo Park's grandfather was born" (p.10). Using the pronoun "our" indicates a binary opposition of black and white, which soon after moves on to a tribal-ethnic opposition when Odenigbo argues that the only authentic identity for the African is the tribe<sup>23</sup>: "I am Nigerian because a white man created Nigeria and gave me that identity. I am black because the white man constructed black to be as different as possible from his white. But I was Igbo before the white man came" (p.20).

As the ethnic tensions start to unravel in Nigeria, Odenigbo begins to focus more and more on Nigerian politics, and his passionate rages during the many intellectual debates at his house provide Ugwu with political and ideological education. By attributing the last word of each discussion to Odenigbo the narrator gives his/her approval on the uttered concepts. Therefore, both Ugwu and Odenigbo can be interpreted as mouthpieces for the author's socio-political concerns. From Ugwu's perspective, Odenigbo's is dissatisfied with the post-independence Nigerian government led by a Prime Minister belonging to northern ethnic group: "To send the army to kill in the name of order? [...] Balewa has lost his mind" (p.91). He sustains thus the first Igbo coup against Balewa's government: "If we had more men like [the coup-leader] in this country, we would not be where we are today,' Master added. 'He actually has a vision'" (p.125). Ugwu

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23 Akpome, Aghogho, 'Narrating a New Nationalism', p. 99

registers Odenigbo's fiery arguments of conspiracy against Igbo by other Nigerian ethnic groups and accusations of complicity of his Yoruba colleague, Miss Adebayo, who argues against secession. This belief justifies his complete siding with the Biafran cause: "And what about our university colleagues in Ibadan and Zaria and Lagos? Who is speaking about this? They kept silent while white expatriates encouraged the rioters to kill Igbo people [...]. Is it not Yoruba people who are killing the Igbo in Lagos?" (p.174) On the other hand, right from this first chapter Ugwu describes Odenigbo as a good and generous man who treats him more like a social equal than as a servant. The master insists in being referred to as Odenigbo and not 'sah', Ugwu notes that he can decide what to cook and he is allowed to sleep on a bed in a room, unlike "Dr Okeke's houseboy next door", who "slept on the kitchen floor" (p.17). And unlike other masters, Odenigbo encourages and supports him in acquiring good education, enrolling Ugwu at the primary school.<sup>24</sup>

Gradually, Odenigbo's material condition and behaviour deteriorates, as Ugwu notices, till he seems to enter a state of resignation to the impending loss of the Biafran war. His pathetic way of talking about the war is registered by Ugwu: "Our troops have lost all the captured territory in the Midwest and the march to Lagos is over [...]. He shook his head, 'We were sabotaged'" (p.204). Towards the end, Odenigbo is in a really bad shape, spending his time drinking and vomiting, unable to cope with the collapse of his ideals of ethnic nationalism. With the fall of Biafra and their return to Nsukka and to the deserted and destroyed house, Odenigbo appears as a wretched sight to Ugwu: "Master squatted beside him and began to search through the charred paper, muttering [something]. After a while he sat down on the bare earth, his legs stretched in front of him, and Ugwu wished he had not; there was something so undignified, so unmasterly about it" (p.418).

At the beginning, Ugwu presented Odenigbo always in favourable terms, as he should have been considering that Ugwu was an inexperienced and easily impressionable young boy who benefited from Odenigbo's liberal ideas. But the above mentioned passage, in which Ugwu uses the word "unmasterly" to describe Odenigbo's broken spirit, marks an important shift in Ugwu's

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<sup>24</sup> Akpome, Aghogho, 'Narrating a New Nationalism', p. 101

psychological development. The young man is now able to observe Odenigbo from outside the 'servant-master' relationship. This change in perception is noticeable also in Ugwu's shift from a preoccupation with Odenigbo and Olanna to a focus on his own thoughts and responses.<sup>25</sup>

Ugwu focalises as well on other characters in the novel. In his role of primary focaliser, it is through Ugwu's perception that most of the other characters are presented to the reader. Olanna, Odenigbo's lover, enters the story and, therefore, Ugwu's narration early in the first chapter. Since Olanna's relationship with Odenigbo is precedent to Ugwu's entry in their household, Ugwu's positive representation of Olanna is conditioned by his admiration for Odenigbo. And although Olanna, beautiful and intelligent as she is, doesn't need any type of recommendation, it is clear that Ugwu is influenced by Odenigbo's introduction of her: "He had been with Master for four months when Master tells him, 'A special woman is coming for the weekend'" (p.21). Ugwu's perception of Olanna, like that of Odenigbo earlier, is mainly sensorial but, in addition to the sense of sight, hearing and smell, he perceives her also through the sense of touch:

Master's English was music, but what Ugwu was hearing now, from this woman, was magic. Here was a superior tongue, a luminous language [...]. It reminded him of slicing a yam with a newly sharpened knife, the easy perfection in every slice. [...] Ugwu was about to pour the cold Coke into her glass when she touched his hand and said, 'Rapuba, don't worry about that.' Her hand was slightly moist. 'Yes mah.' [...] He finally looked at her as she and Master sat down at the table. Her oval face was smooth like an egg [...]. (p.23)

In presenting Olanna, Ugwu's uses words like "magic". He lingers in depicting Olanna's exceptional beauty, and its mesmerizing effect on him, and then he goes on representing her good heartedness. Olanna follows Odenigbo to help Ugwu's mother when she falls ill and comforts the worried boy. When the tension raises in Odenigbo's discussions with his friends, just before the start of the war, Ugwu registers how Olanna's gentleness smoothes Odenigbo's rough behaviour and reduces the harsh lines of his uncompromising ideological stand. Ugwu records a specific occasion in which Olanna makes Odenigbo apologise to Miss Adebayo during one of their passionate conversations: "Olanna said something Ugwu did not hear and then Master spoke in a calmer tone,

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25 Akpome, Aghogho, 'Narrating a New Nationalism', p. 101

'All right ... I will [apologise]'" (p.175). Despite the increasing tension created by the approaching war, Ugwu feels calm when Olanna is near. Even after the conflict had already started, the houseboy registers this moment:

Ugwu was in the kitchen with Olanna, peeling onions, watching the movement of Olanna's shoulder as she stirred the soup on the stove. Onions made him feel cleaned up, as if the tears they drew from him took away impurities. He could hear Baby's high voice in the living room, playing with Master. He did not want either of them to come into the kitchen now. They would destroy the magic he felt, the sweet sting of onions in his eyes, the glow of Olanna's skin. (p.177)

In the charged political climate engendered by the war, Ugwu's focalisation depicts Olanna as a voice of moderation. She reacts to the news regarding the "reprisal attacks" with a balanced remark: "we are all capable of doing the same things to one another, really" (p.177).

At the beginning of the third part of the novel, Ugwu is worried about Odenigbo's involvement with another woman. The presence of Amala, the village girl that Odenigbo's mother brought to his house to seduce her son, leads to infidelity, and the deriving disruption of his love relationship with Olanna drives Odenigbo to depression, which in turn contaminates Ugwu. Therefore, Olanna seems to control the emotional tone of the narrative. The first chapter of the final part of the novel finds Ugwu at the beginning of his war experiences. He's less preoccupied with Odenigbo or Olanna as he increasingly becomes a protagonist in the conflict, and an observer of its worst aspects. In the same chapter, Olanna and Ugwu give their most notable contribution to the Biafran cause while teaching children. Therefore, Ugwu stresses out the important role Olanna played in his evolution from a thirteen-year-old illiterate village boy to a young adult with a refined mentality.<sup>26</sup>

#### **4.2.2 The finding of the authorial voice**

It has been claimed that the Biafran war and its history have been interpreted by an intellectual and military elite and, in introducing the village teenager Ugwu, Adichie generates a critique of the literary historiography dealing with the war, and of the earlier representation of its protagonists. On

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<sup>26</sup> Akpome, Aghogho, 'Narrating a New Nationalism', p. 104

the other hand, Ugwu's role in the kitchen as a houseboy enriches the perspective upon the war not only with the naïve point of view of childhood, but also with an alternative presentation of the life during the war that is neither polemically feminist or masculinist.<sup>27</sup> At the start of the novel, Ugwu is characterised by a thirst to understand this new world and that of his master:

Ugwu did not understand most of the sentences in his books, but he made a show of reading them. Nor did he entirely understand the conversations of Master and his friends but listened anyway and heard that the world had to do more about the black people killed in Sharperville, that the spy plane shot down in Russia serves Americans right [...] and Ugwu would enjoy the clink of beer bottles against glasses, glasses against glasses, bottles against glasses. (p.18)

The houseboy's first stage of development consists in his desire to emulate his master: to be like Odenigbo, to speak, command and know as many things as he does, to even occupy his position:

“Late at night, after Master was in bed, Ugwu would sit on the same chair and imagine himself speaking swift English, talking to rapt imaginary guests, using words like decolonize and pan-African, moulding his voice after Master's, and he would shift and shift until he too was on the edge of the chair”. (p.20)

By the beginning of the war, Ugwu has already started to develop his literary knowledge and to engage with texts. He has an increased command of the English language and mass media has become accessible to him: he listens to the radio, reads the newspapers and his position in the house is not as voyeuristic as it was initially: “but politicians were not like normal people, they were politicians. He read about them in the Renaissance and Daily Times [...] Whenever he drained a pot of boiled beans, he thought of the slimy sink as politician” (p.127). By understanding the printed material, Ugwu slowly participates in Odenigbo's community of intellectuals, he is increasingly able to reflect upon what he eavesdrops from his position in the kitchen: “Ugwu moved closer to the door to listen; he was fascinated by Rhodesia, by what was happening in the south of Africa. He could not comprehend people that looked like Richard taking away the things that belonged to people like him, Ugwu, for no reason at all” (p.213). The culmination of Ugwu's literacy coincides with the birth of the Biafran nation, the essence of the spirit of secession is rendered in his knowledge of Okeoma's poetry<sup>28</sup>:

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27 Ouma, Christopher Ernest Werimo, 'Childhood in Contemporary Nigerian Fiction', p. 91

28 Ouma, Christopher Ernest Werimo, 'Childhood in Contemporary Nigerian Fiction', p. 158

For a moment Ugwu heard nothing – perhaps Olanna too had walked out – and then he heard Okeoma reading. Ugwu knew the poem: If the sun refuses to rise, we will make it rise. The first time Okeoma read it, the same day the Renaissance newspaper was renamed the Biafran Sun, Ugwu had listened and felt buoyed by it, by his favourite line, Clay pots fired in zeal, they will cool our feet as we climb. Now though, it made him teary. (p.175)

As Ugwu's consciousness develops he begins to claim an authorial role in the narrative. Upon forceful conscription in the army, he begins to make use of his literacy skills from the moment of conscription: “I do rayconzar meecon,' High-Tech announced, speaking English for the first time. Ugwu wanted to correct his pronunciation of reconnaissance mission; the boy certainly would benefit from Olanna's class” (p.358). Ugwu deals with a new stage in his development by becoming a teen Biafran soldier. Through the experience of the war, Ugwu's thoughts become more complex and his authorial self becomes visible. The only way he can make sense of the conditions of the war, the hungry soldiers, the lack of ammunition, and less than basic training facilities is to “write down what he did from day to day” (p.360), to safeguard the memory of his traumatic experiences through the act of writing. It is during the war that he comes across the book *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave: Written by Himself*, and the continued lecture of the book helps him maintain his mental sanity and develop an authorial voice. The novel is also important to Ugwu because Frederick Douglass, a former slave, represents the voice of the repressed subject that answers back to his oppressor, and it may have contributed to his awareness and confidence in his own voice.<sup>29</sup> Ugwu is also inspired by a passage in the book: “Even if it cost me my life, I was determined to read. Keep the black man away from the books, keep us ignorant, and we would always be his slaves” (p.360). The first title Ugwu had for The Book was “Narrative of the Life of a Country”. It clearly echoes the title of Douglass' novel, but Ugwu chooses to change the focus. The book is dear to him: “I wish I had that Frederick Douglass book” (p.424).

But Ugwu is not only a victim of the war, seeing as he is conscripted and forced to fight, he becomes also a perpetuator of the traumatic experience. Immersed in blood and death that numb his

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29 De Mey, Joke, 'The Intersection of History, Literature and Trauma ', p. 32

senses, Ugwu becomes an accomplice to rape, a horrific experience which releases a “self-loathing” (p.365) feeling. The gruesome consequences of this incident become fully clear to him when he finds out that his sister Anulika was raped during the war.<sup>30</sup> The gang-rape episode interrupts the identification of the reader with Ugwu, spoiling his stance as the moral authority within the novel. Eventually, he gets gravely wounded and when he finally comes out of the hospital as a war hero, Ugwu, through his scars, is the embodiment of traumatic memory and history, both personal and as part of the collective memory of the Biafran nation.<sup>31</sup> He has recurrent dreams about his traumatic experiences in which images from the war assault his mind; the crying of wounded, the fallen soldiers, the sounds of shelling and the look on the raped girl's face: “His mind wondered often. He did not need the echo of pain on his side and in his buttocks and on his back to remember his ogbunigwe exploding, or High-Tech's laughter, or the dead hate in the eyes of the girl. [...] He woke up hating the image and hating himself” (p.397).

Adichie creates the boy as a problematic protagonist who comes out of war scarred by the rape episode, but who is also atoned and healed through the process of writing. The healing process entails a continuous engagement with the memory of the war and when the need to deal with the guilt becomes too intense Ugwu engages with his mind through the process of writing: “But he tried, and the more he wrote, the less he dreamed” (p.398). Through writing, Ugwu starts to unburden, expiate and deal with those traumatic episodes that he's not able to assimilate. His writing becomes part of an alternative archive of the war with his experience and body as a storage place, it allows him a voice in the history by making him become both the source and the custodian of the same history. It reflects the complexity of the time and space of traumatic experience, in which traumatic memory clashes with the present in its ordinariness:

He sat under a flame tree and wrote in small, careful letters on the sides of old newspapers [...] he wrote a poem about people getting a buttocks rash after defecating in imported buckets [...] he wrote about a young man with a perfect backside [...] Finally, he started to write about Auntie Arize's anonymous death in Kano [...] He wrote about the children of the refugee camp, how

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30 Hevešiová, Simona 'A story to be remembered: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Half of a Yellow Sun'

31 Ouma, Christopher Ernest Werimo, 'Childhood in Contemporary Nigerian Fiction', p. 101

diligently they chased after lizards, how four boys had chased a quick lizard up a mango tree and one of them climbed after it and the lizard leapt off the tree and into the outstretched hand of one of the other three surrounding the tree. (p.398)

When Richard tells him that the war is not his (Richard's) story to tell, Ugwu assumes the authorship of the book titled "The world was Silent When We Died". Thus, his authorial journey is complete at the end of the novel and his dedication to Odenigbo is the peak of an ongoing process of recording and display of his authorial voice: "Ugwu writes his dedication last: For Master, my good man" (p 433).

In using the pronoun "we" for the title of Ugwu's book, the author also launches a collective act of accusation about the role the Biafran war played in international politics. Ugwu's book materializes from the sketches of Richard's story, from his own experience in the war, from his sense of guilt and desire of atonement and especially from individual and collective trauma: it becomes part of a process of creating a multifaceted memory of the Biafran war.<sup>32</sup>

Together with Olanna, Ugwu moves from an initial position of marginality to one of centrality and agency towards the end of the novel, and the memory he carries is the result of his evolution from being a houseboy, to student, to a teacher during the war, a child soldier and finally a chronicler.

### **4.3 Richard – the white outsider**

When asked about the reason behind the introduction of a white character in her novel, Adichie always gives a tongue-in-cheek answer: it was with an eye on a film rights. The joke though contains a bit of truth since films like *Tears of the Sun* or *Blood Diamonds* show a Hollywood eager to foreground a troubled white character capable of making Africa more accessible to a white audience.<sup>33</sup> Another cheeky reason she gives is the desire to annoy white Englishmen considering

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32 Ouma, Christopher Ernest Werimo, 'Childhood in Contemporary Nigerian Fiction', p. 104

33 Akubuiro, Henry, 'Digging into the Palimpsest'

that she has been often asked if, by making Richard sexually dysfunctional, she was trying to take a stand on Englishness or colonialism. While she rejects the accusation and point out that there is something colonial about this reaction from the English readers, Adichie emphasizes the need in the novel for an outsider, a sort of “the outsider inside”. In many ways Richard does become more Biafran than Biafrans themselves and he's unwilling to criticize the problems within Biafra even when the others do so. Together with Odenigbo, he is the most optimistic about the Biafran cause. He's a soul in search of belonging and Biafra is very precious to him since he finds his place in this new country and close to his new love, Kainene. When secession is declared, Richard believes that this is the right moment for him and Kainene to have “a new start, a new country, *their* country”, as “he would be Biafran in a way he could never have been Nigerian – he was here at the beginning, he had shared in the birth. He would belong” (p.168).<sup>34</sup>

On the other hand, Great Britain, which sustained Nigeria in fighting the secession by providing weapons, was seen as the reason Biafrans died so, by creating the character of Richard, Adichie wants to countervail with a figure as far away as possible from Harold Wilson, the British prime minister.<sup>35</sup> Arguably, the author wanted to stay clear of the danger of a single story by creating a rounded white Englishman, the only non-Igbo major character, who was not opinionated but needy, who felt more affinity with Biafrans than to his fellow countrymen. Sure enough, Richard is depicted as an insecure man who's not able to succeed neither in his writing nor in his relationships and who can't manage at first to satisfy Kainene sexually. He speaks badly about English culture and reveals that his parents “had raised him as an afterthought” (p.115). The Englishman is often represented in opposition to his Igbo acquaintances amidst whom he almost always feels “brittle”, and “inconsequential” (p.136) and often is treated with disdain: “‘You sound surprised, as if you never imagined these people capable of such things.’ Richard stared at Okeoma; there was a new and quiet disdain in the way Okeoma stared back, a slight furrow to his eyebrows”

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34 Rushton, Amy, 'Trashing National Identity: The Portrayal of Ethnic Conflict in the Contemporary African Novel', GLITS-e: A Journal of Criticism 2 (2011-2012)

35 Interview with Harriett Gilbert from World Book Club, BBC

(p.111); and “contempt for his trembling hands and pale shyness and the vulnerabilities he wore so openly knotted at his throat like a tie” (p.243). At the beginning Ugwu even describes Richard's whiteness in a burlesque way: “Dr Patel liked the chicken boiled with uziza. So did Mr Richard, although he never ate the chicken skin. Perhaps the pale chicken skin reminded Mr Richard of his own skin. There was no other reason Ugwu could think of; the skin was, after all, the tastiest part” (p.86).

But what looks like an important point in Richard's characterization is the fact that he remains essentially left out from the culture for which he shows strong feelings and struggles so much to belong to. The scene in which Richard gazes at his uncertain reflection and studies his hair and skin colour in a glass door while thinking about his desire to be a Biafran might suggest that he is able of changing into a different being: “Richard looked at his hazy reflection in the glass door. He had a tan and his hair looked fuller, slightly tousled, and he thought of Rimbaud’s words: I is someone else” (p.307). What he believes to have in common with Igbo people is not the appearance but “a fellow feeling” (p.319) and this sense of affinity is done by love, by learning a language, by appreciating a culture and analysing politics. He repeats to them a native proverb: “one’s brother may come from a different land” (p.151). Notwithstanding his knowledge of the Igbo idiom, his passion for Igbo-Ukwu art, his love for Kainene, his reverence for the Biafran leader, and his involvement and defence of the Biafran cause since he's inclined to blame his own country (“It has been caused, simply, by the informal divide-and-rule policies of the British colonial exercise. These policies manipulated the differences between the tribes and ensured that unity would not exist, thereby making the easy governance of such a large country practicable.” (p.166)), Richard is still an outsider, he still seems unable to gain full acceptance into Igboness.<sup>36</sup> Even Kainene, who jokingly called him “a modern day explorer of the Dark Continent” (p.62), recognizes the ethnic difference and challenges his use of the pronoun “we” when he informs her that he found a title for his book:

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36 Akpome, Aghogho, 'Narrating a New Nationalism', p. 122

[...] the title of the book came to Richard: “The World Was Silent When We Died.” He would write it after the war, a narrative of Biafra’s difficult victory, an indictment of the world. Back in Orlu, he told Kainene about the journalists and how he had felt both angry with and sorry for the redhead and how he had felt incredibly alone in their presence and how the book title had come to him. She arched her eyebrows. “We? The world was silent when we died?” “I’ll make sure to note that the Nigerian bombs carefully avoided anybody with a British passport,” he said. Kainene laughed. (p.374)

Richard himself is sometimes aware of this impossibility of closing the gap in a conversation with Madu:

Madu’s irreverence, calling His Excellency Ojukwu, always bothered Richard but he said nothing because he did not want to see Madu’s amused smirk, the same smirk Madu had when he told Kainene, ‘We are running our cars with a mix of kerosene and palm oil’ or ‘We’ve perfected the flying ogbunigwe’ or ‘We’ve made an armoured car from scrap’. His we was edged with exclusion. The deliberate emphasis, the deepened voice, meant Richard was not part of we; the visitor could not take the liberties of the homeowners. (p.304)

Despite desperately wanting to identify with Biafra, Richard remains an outsider. The passage in which he witnesses the murder of Igbo at Kano airport makes him seem almost like a voyeur of others’ suffering. Richard spent a few minutes talking to the custom officer called Nnaemeka before the latter got shot together with a dozen more people simply because they were Igbo, and witnessing their violent death from so near traumatized him<sup>37</sup>: “He almost missed his flight because, as the other passengers walked shakily to the plane, he stood aside, vomiting” (p.153). However, Richard feels numbed in the aftermath and therefore believes he should be more affected by what had happened: “I’m going on. Life is the same,’ he told Kainene. ‘I should be reacting; things should be different” (p.167); he’s troubled by the lack of impact the experience had on him: “He felt more frightened at the thought that perhaps he had been nothing more than a voyeur. He had not feared for his own life, so the massacres became external, outside of him; he had watched them through the detached lens of knowing he was safe” (p.168). He struggles with the realization that being a white Englishman who makes a choice to be Biafran is completely different from having no choice in the matter.<sup>38</sup> He tries to express his trauma in writing, counting on its cathartic effect, but finds himself lost for words: “The echo of unreality weighed each word down; he clearly remembered

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37 De Mey, Joke, 'The Intersection of History, Literature and Trauma', p. 51

38 'Memory, Witness, and War: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie Talks with Bookforum', Bookforum, p. 37

what had happened at that airport, but to write about it he would have to reimagine it, and he was not sure if he could” (p.168). Richard feels helpless in his impossibility to write down his kind of testimony. At the end of the novel, with the disappearance of Kainene, he not only hasn't fully addressed his traumatic memories but probably he will never fully recover: “he knew he would never see Kainene again and that his life would always be like a candlelit room; he would see things only in shadow, only in half glimpses” (p.430). His life as a Biafran is finished when Kainene disappears.<sup>39</sup>

By creating Richard's character together with that of Ugwu, the two very different authors in the novel, Adichie makes a strong political point about the question of authorship and its relationship to history. Richard’s ethnicity allows him a voice, as the writer explains:

Richard’s being a Biafran – of sorts – but then being white meant that he could tell the story to the world, in a way that a black Biafran couldn’t. And I felt that was important because I do think that the way the war was reported, that it was often from a particular point of view, that you often didn’t get the black Biafran voice telling the story of the war.<sup>40</sup>

Almost till the end of the novel, the reader inclines to believe that Richard Churchill is the author of *The Book* and finds out only on the very last page that the real author is Ugwu. It seems easy to be misled since Richard is depicted as a struggling writer, in love with the Igbo culture and history, and he is the one who chooses the title: “*The World Was Silent When We Died*”. By contrast, Ugwu is merely a simple houseboy who can barely read or write when he first arrives at Odenigbo's house, and seems rather unfamiliar with Nigerian politics. Adichie creates deliberately this type of confusion to point out that during the colonial period talking about Africa's history was the prerogative of the white colonizer. And since Africa was described as the “dark continent”, there was no history worth mentioning. By being the author of *The Book*, Ugwu takes back the right to tell his own history, which was already preserved through storytelling and oral tradition.<sup>41</sup> Throughout the entire novel, Richard is striving to write something that will link him to the African

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39 Rushton, Amy, 'Trashing National Identity: The Portrayal of Ethnic Conflict in the Contemporary African Novel'

40 Rushton, Amy, 'Trashing National Identity: The Portrayal of Ethnic Conflict in the Contemporary African Novel'

41 De Mey, Joke, 'The Intersection of History, Literature and Trauma', p. 25

tradition, and his drafts receive different titles, all alluding to the Igbo past and culture: “The Basket of Hands”, or “In the Time of Roped Pots”. But eventually he gives up when he realizes that, as a Western subject, “The war isn't my story to tell, really” (p.425). Something that Ugwu had known all along: “Ugwu nodded. He had never thought that it was” (p.425). The houseboy keeps the same title for The Book, “The World Was Silent When We Died”, words that didn't come originally from Richard, but from something Colonel Madu, the Igbo army major, said to him and he recalled: “The world has to know the truth of what is happening, because they simply cannot remain silent while we die” (p.305). The final title, therefore, comes from a true Biafran and not from Richard. His only contribution are the articles he writes for the Propaganda Directorate upon Colonel Madu's request. But he's not asked to write these articles because he's one of the “experienced insiders”, as Richard was “thrilled” to being referred to, but because he is white. Colonel Madu confirms “Of course I asked you because you are white. They will take what you write more seriously because you are white [...] They will believe a white man who lives in Biafra and who is not a professional journalist” (p.305).<sup>42</sup>

The outlining of Richard's character might be also interpreted as part of Adichie's representation of a postcolonial society. Richard's point of view differs from that of Susan, his former girlfriend, or of the American journalists who are racists and keen to discredit everything that doesn't belong to Western culture. Susan would be extremely jealous when he talked to white women at parties but didn't mind if he flirted with black women, whom she didn't consider good enough to be her rivals. Furthermore, the American journalists couldn't help making racist remarks about the starving children even in tragic situations: “A group of children was roasting two rats around a fire. 'Oh, my God.' The plump one removed his hat and stared. 'Niggers are never choosy about what they eat,' the redhead muttered” (p.370). On the other hand, most of the white characters are depicted in an unflattering way. When Susan informs him that she had had an affair Richard is only surprised that the affair is with John, the husband of Susan's friend Caroline: “But this was

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42 Rushton, Amy, 'Trashing National Identity: The Portrayal of Ethnic Conflict in the Contemporary African Novel'

expatriate life. All they did, as far as he was concerned, was have sex with one another's wives and husbands, illicit couplings that were more a way of passing heat-blanced time in the tropics than they were genuine expressions of passion" (p.237). The same American journalists who come to Biafra are described by Richard as not only shallow, prejudiced and irresponsible but also smelly.<sup>43</sup> Odenigbo also speaks of "white expatriates who encouraged the rioters to kill Igbo people" (p.174) and Madu, describing his military training, points out that "We weren't run well at all in the Congo. We were under the command of a British colonel.' He glanced at Richard and continued to chew" (p.80).

#### **4.4 Olanna – the traumatized witness**

London-educated Olanna, Odenigbo's beautiful girlfriend and later his wife, appears early in the story and conquers everybody not only through her looks but also through her character, introspective and emotional. Always gentle and sensitive, Olanna seems to give the emotional pulse to the novel, and the reader, through the unrolling of events, will intensely feel her pain together with her enduring capacity for compassion and love. She was most deeply affected by the trauma and her struggle to come to terms with it is the most detailed one.<sup>44</sup>

By placing Olanna in Kano during the killing of Igbo people, Adichie intends to record the riots from her point of view while also distinguishing her from other characters with whom she shares the experience of war, but not the traumatic images from Kano or her flight back to Nsukka together with other refugees. At the beginning she doesn't seem to fully comprehend it as if the experience is a film rolling before her eyes, while she watches it with detachment. After Olanna sees the bodies of her family members she "felt a watery queasiness in her bowels before the numbness spread over her and stopped at her feet" (p.147). She doesn't register what has happened

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43 Akpome, Aghogho, 'Narrating a New Nationalism', p. 124

44 Rubin, Merle, 'Nigeria civil war seen from sharpened angles', Los Angeles Times, 12 September 2006, p. E10

and she's puzzled when Mohammed drags her away from the compound: "But she could not leave without Arize. Arize was due anytime. Arize needed to be close to a doctor" (p.147). She feels numb and completely incapable to participate emotionally and to consider the death of her relatives even during her flight. It is only when she arrives home in Nsukka that the horror of what she witnessed in Kano sets in, the numbness paralyses her legs and she collapses at the front door: "Her legs were fine when she climbed down from the train.[...] But at the front door of Odenigbo's house, they failed. So did her bladder" (p.156). It is a paralysis both physical and mental that keeps her bedridden and it lasts for several weeks, making her the helpless victim of the "Dark Swoops", some sort of panic attacks: "A thick blanket descended from above and pressed itself over her face, firmly, while she struggled to breathe" (p.156). Olanna manages to tell Odenigbo in detail the trauma she experienced in Kano, but her lips grow gradually "heavy" and speaking becomes "a labor" (p.197). In telling him though, she's able to liberate herself somehow from the hold of the traumatizing event: "She described the vaguely familiar clothes on the headless bodies in the yard, the still-twitchy fingers on Uncle Mbaezi's hand" (p.156). It is important to give testimony to somebody who's emphatic with the suffering, who can understand the fear and bafflement felt by the witness, and, in registering this event, Adichie emphasises the importance of narration. Odenigbo, however, is not able to completely engage with Olanna's trauma: "But Odenigbo always said, 'Shush, nkem. You'll be fine.' He spoke too softly to her. His voice sounded so silly, so unlike him" (p.156). Olanna needs to reintegrate the traumatic memory into the present, but she doesn't seem to be able yet. Moreover, she's not capable of finding the right words to utter the unspeakable: "When her parents and Kainene visited, she did not say much; it was Odenigbo who told them what she had seen" (p.157).<sup>45</sup> Kainene's thoughtful words that she need not talk prove unnecessary since "Olanna had not even tried to talk about it" (p.197). The trauma experienced during that episode of collective violence are first lived at an individual level.

Through sudden detailed flashbacks and panic attacks the past keeps intruding into the

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45 De Mey, Joke, 'The Intersection of History, Literature and Trauma', p. 49

present, preventing Olanna from living entirely in the moment. An image at a rally triggers a particular memory from the massacre: “Odenigbo raised his arm as he spoke, and Olanna thought how awkwardly twisted Auntie Ifeka's arm had looked, as she lay on the ground, how her blood had pooled so thick that it looked like glue, not red but close to black” (p.163). There are images which she doesn't recall willingly and thus she struggles to regain control: “Olanna shook her head, to shake away the thoughts, and took Baby from Ugwu's neck and hugged her close” (p.163). Nonetheless, it takes a long time for Olanna to be able to free herself from all these flashbacks and intrusions of the past: “It was often difficult to visualize anything concrete that was not dulled by memories of Arize and Auntie Ifeka and Uncle Mbazi, that did not feel like life being lived on suspended time” (p.185). Furthermore, unable to grasp it head-on, she feels very uncertain about the entire experience: “And she wondered if she was mistaken, if she had perhaps imagined the bodies lying in the dust” (p.193).<sup>46</sup>

Olanna's traumatic experience in Kano marks only the beginning of what will be then, for three years, the ethnic war and, together with the other Biafrans, she'll have to adapt to dire living conditions in order to survive. Despite her interaction with the other refugees who flee the war areas and the terror and deprivation that she shares with them, the witnessing of her relatives' massacre remains her personal unutterable story. When Odenigbo brings up her cousin Arize's death to prove that all northerners are involved in murder to the same extent, Olanna is angered that he used her memories to justify his stance, that he “cheapened Arize's memory in order to make a point in a spurious argument” (p.238). Her reaction proves also that she considers the tragic end of her relatives as part of her own, personal story, “irreducible” to a collective tragedy. She “recoils” thus from Odenigbo and is not surprised to experience another “Dark Swoop”, a crisis with which she has to deal alone. Likewise, when she is literally summoned to her grandfather's house to relate her memories, she doesn't inform Odenigbo and is unwilling “to talk about it” (p.239) with him, excluding him from her personal experience.

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46 De Mey, Joke, 'The Intersection of History, Literature and Trauma', p. 50

Since she is the only survivor and witness of the killings in the north, Olanna is obliged to tell the story and confirm the death of the relatives to the family reunion, but this forced sharing doesn't end her isolation. She feels guilty at being both the only testimony and the bearer of bad news, and fears that her cousins would “question her for being alive” (p.241), and this only intensifies her sense of isolation and her feeling of responsibility for “funerals based not on physical bodies but on her words” (p.241). This burden makes Olanna wonder if memories are to be trusted, considering that no one else can confirm them and she falls again into the “strange silence” (p.243) brought by Odenigbo’s earlier comment. Despite the value of testimony that the public utterance gives to Olanna's story, the testifying gives little comfort to Olanna or Mama Dozie, the relative who furiously questions Olanna’s words. There is no sense of closure either in telling or hearing the story, respectively, and the forced testimony, given that Olanna was summoned, reiterate the trauma, becomes a traumatizing performance itself.<sup>47</sup>

It is not until the three years of the war have passed that Olanna takes a huge step towards dealing with her trauma and, therefore, managing to distance herself from the event. Olanna takes the initiative to tell Ugwu the story of the girl’s head in the calabash and continues since “Ugwu was writing as she spoke, and his writing, the earnestness of his interest, suddenly made her story important, made it serve a larger purpose that even she was not sure of, and so she told him all she remembered” (p.512). Describing the scene of the woman in the train, Olanna realizes that her story is worth telling and, by telling it, she might be set free. She shows her surprise when Ugwu asks her a question about what she witnessed: “How was it plaited?” Ugwu asked. Olanna was surprised, at first, by the question and then she realized that she clearly remembered how it was plaited” (p.409). Her surprise is due to the fact that she wasn't aware of how much of the memory still lingered with her. It's the first time Olanna actually and actively engages with the traumatic memories, reflects on the way she remembers them, and even if it's not about her relatives' slaughter it's still an important part of that day. The narration has hence a therapeutic effect for Olanna as, arguably, it might have

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<sup>47</sup> Mzali, Ines, 'Postcolonial Readings of Resistance and Negotiation', p. 256

had for Adichie.<sup>48</sup> This episode is also important for Olanna because she realizes that the story is no longer “hers”, but has a collective importance and has to be shared with the community. What causes this shift is that, by putting her words in writing, Ugwu introduces her story into the area of representability and representation.<sup>49</sup> Although Olanna's experience is integrated into the collective loss, there are also limits to the narrating of collective trauma. Recording and sharing the experience doesn't preclude or include the individual aspect of trauma. The trauma will always have two dimensions and this is obvious in Olanna's reaction to the radio announcement of the Biafran surrender. To Ugwu's confused question “What now, mah?” she quietly answers: “Now I can go and find my sister” ( p.515).<sup>50</sup>

Olanna is therefore, the third character who, together with Ugwu and Richard, exemplifies the importance of narration, its vital role in dealing with the past and its therapeutic effect for everybody involved. The narration of the story could be, as in Richard's case, a very lonesome and personal project, it could be beneficial for the entire community, as Ugwu's book might be, or, finally, it could create interpersonal connections as in Olanna's situation, since she managed to articulate her story with Ugwu's help.<sup>51</sup> Also, the events narrated acquire importance not only on the personal but also on the communal level. Negotiating gradually her personal memory within communal history, Olanna moves from her incapacity to express her trauma to a spontaneous description of it and even desire for it to be heard and recorded. With Ugwu's writing of her story, her audience grows and is included into the collective memory of Biafran history.<sup>52</sup>

#### **4.5 Gender issues**

Most of the works on the Biafran War were written by male authors and the female perspective was

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48 De Mey, Joke, 'The Intersection of History, Literature and Trauma', p. 24

49 Mzali, Ines, 'Postcolonial Readings of Resistance and Negotiation', p. 12

50 Mzali, Ines, 'Postcolonial Readings of Resistance and Negotiation', p. 258

51 De Mey, Joke, 'The Intersection of History, Literature and Trauma', p. 52

52 Mzali, Ines, 'Postcolonial Readings of Resistance and Negotiation', p. 254

usually scarce. When women's voices started to be heard, they affirmed the validity and relevance of women's roles during the war: women have always been involved in wars, actively in many different roles, passively as victims of violence, hunger or displacement. Their works usually questioned the war myths of the gender separation into war front and home front and gendered spaces, roles and relations are often reversed.<sup>53</sup>

Although Adichie states that the distinction between female novels and male novels “is all quite silly when you think about it seriously - though there are writers, both male and female, who are less engaged with emotion”,<sup>54</sup> *Half of a Yellow Sun* is undoubtedly the endeavour of a committed female African writer and the women Adichie writes about are mostly resilient and fight their daily battles by playing multiple roles, which show the arbitrariness of such gender roles, and by extension the women's capability to perform them. The author declares also:

I believe that the true war heroes are the ones about whom nobody writes books, and especially the Biafran women who showed remarkable bravery in keeping families together. I think the reason that the ordinary person's story is more engaging is that it is in those lives that we see the real effects of war – the indignity of starvation, the struggle to hold on to their humanity.<sup>55</sup>

Her work is also a counter-proof that “there is no such thing as an African feminist because to be African meant an automatic disregard of feminism” as if feminism was derived from some “kind of western poisoning” and not “an acknowledgement of and a desire to change the fact that men have in most if not all of the world had social, economic and political privileges solely because they are men”.<sup>56</sup> Adichie herself discards such earlier labels as “African feminist” or “happy African feminist” with which she used to describe herself in response to the idea of feminism and Africanism as being mutually exclusive or, respectively, that “feminists were just angry women who could not find husbands”. She defines herself now as simply a feminist, but also points out “the power that comes from the very act of naming something”.<sup>57</sup>

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53 Marion Pape, Matatu, 'Nigerian War Literature by Women From Civil War to Gender War', Amsterdam: 2005 Iss. 29/30; p. 231

54 'Per Contra Interviews: Miriam N. Kotzin with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie', Per Contra, Spring 2006

55 My Book Should Provoke A Conversation - Chimamanda Ngozi', Interview with Wale Adebani

56 'The Writer as Two Selves: Reflections on the Private Act of Writing and the Public Act of Citizenship'

57 'The Writer as Two Selves: Reflections on the Private Act of Writing and the Public Act of Citizenship'

Therefore, Adichie's novel is full of women, from all social classes, strong-willed, all of them doing a great deal in order to survive or making efforts to improve their own lives: aged mothers keeping to the village, wealthy traders, hawkers, female lecturers, quiet housewives, chatty neighbours. Some defy convention since, as in the case of Olanna and Kainene, they co-habit with boyfriends and their sexual attitudes are relatively tolerant.<sup>58</sup> Others completely reverse gendered roles and distinctions, as it is obvious in the figure of Mrs. Muokelu, who might “have been better off being born a man” (p.270). Others, although uneducated, give wise lessons of life, like Auntie Ifeka who teach Olanna to stand on her feet and fight: “Do you not have your own flat and your own job? [...] You must never behave as if your life belongs to a man. Do you hear me? Your life belongs to you and you alone” (p.203).

The book's main pair is the twin sisters, Olanna and Kainene, daughters of Nigeria's new, corrupt elite who both rebel against their parents' values but fail to acknowledge their own resemblance to each other. Adichie has undoubtedly chosen the figure of twins as to make a point to the change of customs: no more abominations and bad omens as in pre-colonial times, but individuals like any other with their own dilemmas.<sup>59</sup>

Although already an adult and an accomplished woman who seems to know how she wants her life to be at the beginning of the story, Olanna has to come to terms with herself and to pass through a long process of self-recognition and awareness. The fact that she's so famous for her beauty seems to isolate her, her looks end up objectifying her: Odenigbo calls her “a distracting Aphrodite” (p.27), Miss Adebayo sees her as “illogically pretty” (p.50), and Okeoma defines her as a “water mermaid” (p.50). Olanna herself confirms her status as a valuable object of consumption: “My sister and I are meat. We are here so that suitable bachelors will make the kill” (p.61). When Odenigbo's mother comes to his house in order to impose on him her own choice of a wife, her behaviour troubles many of the assumptions that supported Olanna's cosmopolitan way of living.

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58 Marion Pape, Matatu, 'Nigerian War Literature by Women From Civil War to Gender War', p. 231

59 White, E. Frances, 'While the World Watched', *Women's Review of Books* 24.3 (May-June 2007), pp. 10-11

Their colliding points of view make Olanna feel insecure: “Odenigbo’s mother’s visit had ripped a hole in her safe mesh of feathers, startled her, snatched something away from her. She felt one step away from where she should be” (p.107). She finds out that she is not as self-sufficient as she thought: she “felt as if she had somehow failed [Odenigbo] and herself by allowing his mother’s behaviour to upset her” (p.104). She alternates between senses of dependency and autonomy wishing “there was somebody she could lean against; then she wished she was different, the sort of person who did not need to lean on others” (p.106). Her beliefs are further shaken by Odenigbo’s infidelity. Aunty Ifeka and Edna, two very different but strong women, give Olanna pragmatic advice pushing her towards self-awareness. The first one makes Olanna acknowledge that “Your life belongs to you and you alone” (p.230), the second asks her “Why isn’t what you are enough?” (p.236) Her betrayal in exchange, comes therefore as a levelling act that fills her “with a sense of well-being, with something close to grace” (p.236). Moreover, Olanna excuses Odenigbo's betrayal and transforms it into the basis for increased intimacy instead of disruption, reversing therefore the patriarchy’s dynamic. Instead of considering herself the victim of Odenigbo’s unfaithfulness, she pinpoints the real victim in Amala, “who did not have a voice” (p.256) and who “was so helpless” (p.258).<sup>60</sup> Despite her helplessness, the unfortunate Amala shows nonetheless a bit of agency of her own when she seeks desperately to abort the pregnancy by eating hot peppers and, after the birth, when she refuses to take care of the baby. Olanna proves capable of both emotional detachment and empathy and decides to raise Odenigbo’s child as hers, but without denying its provenance. Her later decision to adopt the baby makes Olanna to finally experience a conscious sense of completeness: “It was as if it were what she had always wanted to do” (p.257). In acting so determined, without taking in consideration notions of propriety or social class, Olanna discovers herself.<sup>61</sup> Significantly, motherhood and childlessness are made quite irrelevant in the novel.

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60 Ogwude, Sophia O., 'History and Ideology in Chimamanda Adichie's Fiction', *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde* 48.1 (2011), pp. 110-123, p. 120

61 Olufunwa, Harry, 'Superwoman: Enhanced Femininity in Contemporary Nigerian Women's Fiction', *Asian Women* 28.3 (2012), pp. 1-29, p. 21

Adichie justifies Olanna's act as a way of exploring the idea of having a child in ways outside of the biological way: "I was horrified recently to discover that Igbo's way of saying adoption is to say 'to buy a child'". It is a behavior that has absolutely no cultural reason behind it, on the contrary, but it deals with the issue of adoption, which isn't something Igbo people embrace wholly.<sup>62</sup>

Olanna's reaches self-awareness in a more traumatic way, while she finds herself in one of the anti-Igbo pogroms in the north. When the horror of the reality dawns on her, amidst Igbo corpses, she is acutely made aware of her own mortality.<sup>63</sup> Being a witness to her relatives' massacre and then managing to escape to Eastern Nigeria, Olanna become defiantly Biafran marking the emergence of her self-awareness. The Dark Swoops and the loss of the use of her legs that she experiences as a result of her trauma and the subsequent return of her ability to walk proves a new sense of determined action that she has obtained, and which coincides with the moment of the declaration of secession. Unable to walk just a few days before, she sees herself as one of those who "could stand barefoot over red-hot embers" (p.166).<sup>64</sup>

As the violence of the war escalates, Olanna's understanding of herself deepens. Like most of the people, Olanna is simply not able to understand the war, so the conflict has even a stronger impact throwing her into an almost surreal world. Social values and cultural norms are lost and all that it counts is the amoral cry for survival. The celebration of life and the resistance in the face of tragedy are so closely connected that they are often difficult to tell apart. Olanna and Odenigbo's wedding is interrupted by an air raid, and her wedding dress becomes an extremely dangerous item of clothing. Every time they have to flee from the conflict, they have fewer belongings, less hopes, and lower expectations. As Biafra becomes smaller, Olanna has to come to terms with the deaths of friends, the humiliations and deprivations, and the terror of air raids.

Olanna's change derives paradoxically from the ruins and the sense of extreme vulnerability in war. War brutally resolves many of the dilemmas that made her feel alien: the life of privilege she

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62 Interview with Harriett Gilbert from World Book Club, BBC, 30 July 2009

63 Olufunwa, Harry, 'Superwoman: Enhanced Femininity in Contemporary Nigerian Women's Fiction', p. 22

64 Olufunwa, Harry, 'Superwoman: Enhanced Femininity in Contemporary Nigerian Women's Fiction', p. 24

was born into has become senseless, the tension with Kainene sorted itself out under the pressure of conflict, the sense of a lack of belonging disappears in the collective struggle for survival. Instead of thinking she has nothing to lose, Olanna realizes she has everything to gain, and thus something worth fighting for: “Olanna exhaled, filled with a frothy rage. It was the sense of being inconsequential that pushed her from extreme fear to extreme fury. She had to matter. She would no longer exist limply, waiting to die. Until Biafra won, the vandals would no longer dictate the terms of her life” (p.286). And so she rises above and learns to survive. Her determination is obvious in the way she overcomes her fear of warplanes. “Caution had become, to her, feeble and faithless. Her steps were sturdy and she looked up often at the clear sky to search for bomber jets, because she would stop and hurl stones and words up at them” (p.286). Even among other strong women like Mrs. Muokelu and Mama Oji who were able to improvise physical and emotional stunts in order to survive, Olanna stands out because she has realized that survival is not all about the satisfaction of physical needs but also about the power to reconcile the contradictions that exist all around her.<sup>65</sup> Olanna manages thus to work through her debilitating trauma and starts searching to make a change and help the community in which she lives. After the primary school is turned into a refugee camp, Olanna starts teaching mathematics, English, civics as well as ideals of the Biafran cause. She organizes the classes in the yard, and, helped by Professor Achara, she also is able to obtain some books, benches, and blackboards.<sup>66</sup> Olanna’s determination to preserve the woman she has become proves even more important when the people dearest to her have personal crises of their own. Her faith in herself makes faith in them also possible: to trust that Odenigbo will get over his loss of ideals and his mother's death, that Ugwu will come back alive, that Kainene will return from her affia attack. As Biafra loses the war all Olanna has is self-belief and she will have to rely on her inner strength to find her way in the insecure post-conflict Nigeria.<sup>67</sup>

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65 Olufunwa, Harry, 'Superwoman: Enhanced Femininity in Contemporary Nigerian Women's Fiction', p. 26

66 Atieh, Majda R. & Ghada Mohammad, 'Post-traumatic Responses in the War Narratives of Hanan al-Shaykh's *The Story of Zahra* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*', *inter-disciplinary.net* (February 2012)

67 Olufunwa, Harry, 'Superwoman: Enhanced Femininity in Contemporary Nigerian Women's Fiction', p. 27

If Olanna has to follow a long process in order to reach an advanced insight and foresight, with her non-identical twin, Kainene, Adichie shows that it is possible for a woman to attain and maintain personal autonomy. She is the character Adichie admires the most and maybe the one through which she transmits the feminist message better.

Kainene has from the beginning an acute sense of self, a strong ability for independent action, and a desire to be true to her beliefs of who she thinks she is, regardless of society or family. She's redoubtable, acerbic and strong, yet she has a softer side which she rarely displays, even to Richard. Kainene defines herself not only in relation to others, but also in opposition to conventional notions of what women are supposed to be and do. She says how her father wanted a son: in fact, as good as any man, Kainene manages her father's business, chasing contracts unapologetically and paying the necessary bribes to have them.<sup>68</sup> Where Olanna is naïve, Kainene shows clear-eyed determination. She understands that the war is ultimately not a fight for self-determination but an attempt to control oil. She portrays Nigeria's ruling elite as "a collection of illiterates who read nothing and eat food they dislike at overpriced Lebanese restaurants and have social conversations about one subject: "How's the new car behaving?"".<sup>69</sup> Olanna admires, and lacks, her sister's "sharp edges, bitter tongue and supreme confidence" (p.272). Moreover, it is thanks to her practicality and materialism that Olanna, Odenigbo, and Baby are able to have house and food secured for them once they are forced to flee. While Olanna thinks highly of "His Excellency" Ojukwu as the savior of the Biafrans who will win simply because he is just, Kainene's cynicism allows her to distance herself from Ojukwu and his tendency to "invent" saboteurs in order to neutralize opponents while, at the same time, to show her support for Biafra.<sup>70</sup>

Kainene behaves in an unconventional way even in love matters. She's the one who decides to take as her lover Richard, a white British expatriate writer, whom her parents ignored because he

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68 Olufunwa, Harry, 'Superwoman: Enhanced Femininity in Contemporary Nigerian Women's Fiction', p. 27

69 'My Book Should Provoke A Conversation - Chimamanda Ngozi', Interview with Wale Adebani

70 Mzali, Ines, 'Postcolonial Readings of Resistance and Negotiation', p. 270

didn't know anyone worth knowing.<sup>71</sup> Like Olanna, Kainene is the witness of a similarly horrific experience when she sees her steward's head being severed by a shell. She also has to overcome this traumatic event and to counter the trauma in order to survive and engage with the world again. If Olanna involves herself in the pedagogical side, Kainene works on the economic aspect. She believes that they can make a difference, and decides to create their own income. Hence, Kainene starts working as a food supplier for the refugee camp, and starts a farm in order to grow their own protein, and asks the Red Cross to send them a doctor every week. Towards the end, she will also be the one who will risk her life to go on an 'afia attack', a trade behind enemy lines for basic food provisions, a trade from which she will never come back.

The trajectories of growth of the female characters are counterbalanced by a symbolic emasculation of the male characters. When the once fiery and self-assured Odenigbo returns to his Nsukka home after the war and the violent death of his mother, he becomes almost a ghost of his former self in Ugwu's eyes: "After a while he sat down on the bare earth, his legs stretched in front of him [...] there was something so undignified, so unmasterly about it" (p.418). He feels completely paralyzed by the loss of his ideals and is unable to intellectualize the horrors. For Richard, who had begun with the ambition of writing about the war, and of finding self-realisation in the relationship with Kainene, the end is sombre: "Darkness descended on him, and when it lifted, he knew that he would never see Kainene again and that his life would always be like a candlelit room; he would see things only in shadow, only in half glimpses" (p.430).<sup>72</sup>

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71 'My Book Should Provoke A Conversation - Chimamanda Ngozi', Interview with Wale Adebaniwi

72 Akpome, Aghogho, 'Narrating a New Nationalism', p. 24

## Chapter V

### Consuming life: sexuality and food

*Half of a Yellow Sun* is full of dreadful stories about what the war does to people but, somehow, the story is oddly uplifting: it is not only a political and historical book but also a celebration of joy, food and sex. Adichie herself declares that, above all it is "really a story of love". In her essay, "African 'Authenticity' and the Biafran Experience", Adichie confesses a deliberate attempt to underscore the humanity of the characters: "I was determined to make my novel about what I like to think of as the grittiness of being human – a book about relationships [...], about people who have sex and eat food and laugh, about people who are fierce consumers of life".<sup>1</sup>

#### 5.1 Sexuality

One of the main issues in Adichie's work is the questioning of what "African authenticity" means. Against all those stereotyped images of what a proper African book should be, she pushes forward honesty: "There are people who think that to be a good Nigerian is to shut up about all the things that are bad. I am quite patriotic in many ways. I care very much about where I come from. [...] But I also think caring means you have to be honest".<sup>2</sup> And since she was labeled to be, unlike any other African writer, "that crazy feminist who won't shut up and writes sex scenes in her fiction", Adichie questions and provokes any type of expectation. Thus, for those who told her that "You know, for an African book, so much sex in it!" she replies "So Africans don't have sex?".<sup>3</sup> The presence of sex scenes in *Half of a Yellow Sun* derives also from the knowledge that people not only died during the

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1 Eromosele, Ehijele Femi, 'Sex and Sexuality in the Works of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie', PHD, Department of English, University of Ibadan, Nigeria

2 Barber, John, 'Chimamanda Adichie: a princess of the written word', *Globe and Mail*, 4 July 2009, p. R1

3 'Interview with Chimamanda N. Adichie', by Joshua Jelly-Schapiro, *Believer* 7.1 (January 2009), pp. 54-61, p. 57

war, but were also born, as it's her brother's case; that people not only lost everything and had to run from town to town, but also tried to live their life the best they could, went to weddings and laughed. Also the presence of bodies and the violence inflicted upon them by the war had to be balanced somehow by the physicality of love, since Adichie believes that the physical selves are “a key part of the way [one] understands the world”.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, in a world in which characters from various ethnic and national backgrounds strive, sexuality becomes a common denominator. Adichie's underscoring of sex in the novel should be interpreted as an affirmation of life, as the characters' holding on to their humanity in the midst of death and uncertainty”.<sup>5</sup> It has been argued that the narrative is both “adult-rated and adulterated”<sup>6</sup>: the sex scenes are much more graphic and explicit than they were in *Purple Hibiscus* and most of them revolve and develop around the question of betrayal. The tension created between Odenigbo and Olanna is due to Odenigbo's one night stand with Amala; Olanna makes it even more complicated by sleeping with Richard, who then has to face Kainene's anger and her revengeful burning of his manuscript; the relationship between Kainene and her sister Olanna becomes even more difficult because of the betrayal. All main characters are involved, in one way or another, in some form of betrayal and all of them, as part of Biafra, are betrayed by the northerners first, betray Nigeria by the act of secession, and are again betrayed by the western community which lets them die of starvation.

The emphasized sex scenes are mainly a celebration of love, as in the case of the complex, flawed love between Odenigbo and Olanna. They make love at significant moments in their life, and the type of intercourse mirrors the nature of the events leading up to it. Their way of lovemaking could be considered atypical for the African relationship, since it's Olanna who usually initiates and takes the lead: “She knelt down before him and unbuttoned his shirt [...] She unbuckled his trousers. She did not let him take them off” (p.273). Their lovemaking reflects also the fact that

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4 'Interview with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie', by Joshua Jelly-Schapiro, p. 58

5 My Book Should Provoke A Conversation - Chimamanda Ngozi', Interview with Wale Adebani

6 My Book Should Provoke A Conversation - Chimamanda Ngozi', Interview with Wale Adebani

Olanna is the one who decides in family matters: if and when to get married, whether or not to have a child, where to have the wedding. Odenigbo, in exchange, seems to have control over her emotions and Olanna is often self-conscious about the fact that she's always needy of him, both inside and outside the realm of sex. She confesses to Odenigbo her infidelity in order to force him to need her in the same way she needed him, and she's almost pleased that, through her betrayal, "his certainty had been rocked" (p.307).<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the underlying of Odenigbo's virility conveys also the fact that he is no less of a man because of Olanna's wielding of the relationship. The physicality of their bodies surfaces also when there is a flaw in their relationship.<sup>8</sup> After the night spent with Amala, Odenigbo is not able to hide it from Olanna, even if he doesn't say anything: "When they hugged, his body did not relax against hers and the brief press of his lips felt papery" (p.259). And when Odenigbo lost himself in the tragedy of the war and ends up drinking his days away, his physical presence seems to be unbearable for Olanna: "Once he tried to hold Olanna, to kiss her, but his touch made her skin crawl and she turned away from him and went outside to sleep on a mat on the veranda, where Ugwu had sometimes slept[...] She did not want to speak to him, to sleep beside him[...] She said little to him" (p.382).

The sex scenes are also about the ability of love to transcend sexuality, as in the case of Richard and Kainene. Richard is not the usual stereotypical British character, superior and condescending but he's an ordinary, fallible human being in search of his identity. His incapacity to perform initially tells more about Kainene and their relationship than it says about him. Nonetheless, in his relationships, he plays anyway the secondary role. Susan, his first girlfriend in Africa, is the one who has shown him around and presented him to important people. Invited to Odenigbo's house, Richard is also more of a passive participant in the conversation, being always self-conscious and insecure about himself. With Kainene thus, she will be the one to take the lead and will remain mostly an enigma to Richard, who'll just tag along. Richard's effort to know her

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7 Manion, Caitlin, 'Twins: A Compelling Narrative Device in Two Igbo Novels', Western Oregon University: Meyer Prize for Excellence in Literature, 2010

8 Eromosele, Ehijele Femi, 'Sex and Sexuality in the Works of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie'

sexually goes hand in hand with his effort to understand her and their lovemaking gets increasingly better, the more he achieves this understanding. Nonetheless, he never questions his subordinate role:

They would go out to the veranda and he would push the table aside and spread out the soft rug and lie on his naked back. When she climbed astride, he would hold her hips and stare up at the night sky and, for those moments, be sure of the meaning of bliss. It was their new ritual since the war started, the only reason he was grateful for the war. (p.315)

The position Kainene assumes during the sexual act is representative of her control in the relationship. As with Odenigbo and Olanna, Kainene's control is balanced by the fact that Richard has a certain power over her emotions. Richard is surprised to find in his briefcase a note written by Kainene which shows her vulnerability: "Is love this misguided need to have you beside me most of the time? Is love this safety I feel in your silences? Is it this belonging, this completeness?" (p.154) But unlike Odenigbo, the only time Richard is presented as manly is when he sleeps with a drunk Olanna. The love between Richard and Kainene makes a point also about cross-cultural and cross-racial relationships, about possibility. Even if it might be more difficult, love and joy can also spring from another culture.<sup>9</sup>

Sex represents also an easy solution in the absence of a loved one, a substitute for a bigger or a deeper feeling. During the nights spent in the boys' quarters, Ugwu has secret rendez-vous with Chinyere, the neighborhood's maid. While he has sex with her, Ugwu fantasizes about Nnesinachi, a girl he liked back in the village, and presumes the maid does the same, since she, in turn, calls somebody else's name towards the end<sup>10</sup>:

There was something moist about the darkness, about their bodies close together, and he imagined that she was Nnesinachi and that the taut legs encircling him were Nnesinachi's. She was silent at first and then, hips thrashing, her hands tight around his back, she called out the same thing she said every time. It sounded like a name—Abonyi, Abonyi—but he wasn't sure. (p.149)

On the other hand, sex can be used as an oppression and exploitation tool by those who have the power. Eberechi, Ugwu's lover, is offered as a gift to the Colonel who has in his power to

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9 My Book Should Provoke A Conversation - Chimamanda Ngozi', Interview with Wale Adebaniwi

10 Eromosele, Ehijele Femi, 'Sex and Sexuality in the Works of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie'

change her brother's posting, and the colonel considers this act as merely a deserved benefit. Ojukwu, the Biafran leader, is said to find women at his disposal by accusing their husbands of being saboteurs and sending them to prison. Not even Father Marcel, the catholic priest who's supposed to maintain moral values in the society, is exempted. At the refugee camp, he gives food to young girls in exchange for sex, and doesn't care if he gets them pregnant. Kainene reacts in shock: "Apparently I've been blind; she's not the only one," Kainene said. ' He fucks most of them before he gives them the crayfish that I slave to get here'" (p.408).<sup>11</sup>

Finally, the emphasized sexual aspect represents an atrocious violation, in the case of a war rape. It has, of course, nothing to do with love anymore, but it is central to the issue of what makes us human and how, especially in a war situation, this very humanity is questioned. War doesn't only savage us, but it is also capable of turning us into savages, of destroying in us any trace of the so-called civilization.<sup>12</sup> By gang-raping that helpless girl at the bar, Ugwu and the other soldiers betray the very idea of freedom they are fighting for, and the act will haunt Ugwu for a long time afterwards. The war transformed him from a teacher, somebody who builds others' future, into a "Target Destroyer", who's looked upon with "calm hate" (p. 428).

## 5.2 Food

In her TED speech, Adichie talks about the inherent power that stories have, their ability to dispossess or to humanize. She mentions the huge effect stories had on her since she was a child, how she felt transported into another world and how she felt compelled to replicate in her own young scribbles characters who were white and blue-eyed, who played in the snow, who ate apples or drank ginger beer. In several of her interviews Adichie mentions her fascination with the food consumed by the characters in foreign books. She laughs now about her obsession with ginger beer

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11 Eromosele, Ehijele Femi, 'Sex and Sexuality in the Works of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie'

12 My Book Should Provoke A Conversation - Chimamanda Ngozi', Interview with Wale Adebani

and her desperate desire to taste it despite not knowing what it was; and about her obsession with bagels which, again, she had no idea what they were, how she even mispronounced their name giving them something of a French accent, and her profound disappointment to discover, the first time she arrived in the United States, that the bagel was nothing more than a simple fat doughnut.

From a very early age, Adichie understood thus that to anchor the reader into the story and to make everything seem more real, the writer has to create a connection, to make an appeal to the senses so that the reading experience would become complete. She gathered that thoughts, memories, recollections pass all through the senses and make us who we are. *Half of a Yellow Sun* is hence full of flavours, warmth or coolness, softness or crunchiness, mouth and tongue being the most exposed and vulnerable, connected to the most intimate sense of the personal histories. The writer knows that flavours allow connection with and knowledge of a culture and, although exotic and imagination-boggling for the non-Nigerian reader, words like garri, or jollof or yum would create the same fascination for them as did ginger beer for her.

Food or the lack of it is so overly present throughout the novel that it can almost be considered as a character in itself. Mealtimes, food preparation and consumption constitute the scenes in which the characters mostly dwell upon. Through food, Adichie traces the regression of the characters, how the more the food lacked, the more the idealism and optimism began to fade away and all that was left was the struggle to survive. The book starts with an abundance that shocked Ugwu, when he came to live with Odenigbo and found out that he actually “ate meat every day” (p.3), to such an extent that he felt compelled to hide chunks of chicken in his clothes and take them to his bedroom:

Oranges, bread, beer, soft drinks: many things in packets and cans were arranged on different levels and, at the top, a roasted, shimmering chicken, whole but for a leg. He touched the chicken again and licked his finger before he yanked the other leg off, eating it until he had only the cracked, sucked pieces of bones left in his hand. (p.10)

It indulges in all the recipes that Ugwu devotedly creates in the kitchen, confecting pepper soup, spicy jollof rice and chicken boiled in herbs. Beer and brandy flow as the houseboy serves

Odenigbo's friends while listening to bits of intellectual discussions.

The way one eats food tells a lot about their character and Ugwu is always keen in noticing how each of Odenigbo's friends behave in front of a plate:

Master's plate was always the most rice-strewn, as if he ate distractedly so that the grains eluded his fork. Olanna's glass had crescent-shaped lipstick marks. Okeoma ate everything with a spoon, his fork and knife pushed aside. Professor Ezeka had brought his own beer, and the foreign-looking brown bottle was beside his plate. Miss Adebayo left onion slices in her bowl. And Mr Richard never chewed his chicken bones. (p. 99)

The family table, however, is typically situated in the home and is a reassurance of cultural continuity and stability. Food practices can be a means of entering into cultural practice, and eating authentically comes close to cultural acceptance. Richard, for example, never entirely felt at home in England and he ended up fighting for the Biafran cause and considering himself a Biafran, and his relationship with food reflects entirely this position. He never really enjoyed English food ("he had disliked the food of his childhood, the sharp-tasting kippers full of bones, the porridge with the appalling thick skin on top like a waterproof lining, the overcooked roast beef with fat around the edges drenched in gravy" (p.87)), but went to great lengths in consuming and savouring the traditional Nigerian pepper soup, although, as in life, this strong and tangy African taste might have been too much for him:

Richard ate the pepper soup slowly. After he had spooned up the pieces of tripe, he raised the glass bowl to his lips and drank the broth. His nose was running, there was a delicious burning on his tongue, and he knew his face was red. 'Richard eats this so easily,' Okeoma said, seated next to him, watching him. 'Ha! I didn't think our pepper was made for your type, Richard!' Odenigbo said, from the other end of the dining table. 'Even I can't take the pepper,' another guest said [...]. 'This is proof that Richard was an African in his past life,' Miss Adebayo said, before blowing her nose into a napkin. The guests laughed. Richard laughed too, but not loudly, because there was still too much pepper in his mouth. He leaned back on his seat. 'It's fantastic,' he said. 'It clears one up'. (p. 128)

Odenigbo's mother, a simple village woman who feels insecure because of her difficulty in dealing with different, more modern mentalities, doesn't know any other way of expressing it than by being controlling and bossy in the only space in her son's house remotely similar to the one at home, the kitchen:

'Rest?' She smiled and walked into the kitchen. Ugwu watched her unpack foodstuffs from a bag:

dried fish and cocoyams and spices and bitter leaf. 'Have I not come from the farm?' she asked. 'This is my rest. I have brought ingredients to make a proper soup for my son. I know you try, but you are only a boy. What does a boy know about real cooking?'" (p.112)

She dismisses everything that it's unfamiliar or new as unworthy or wrong:

'Ugwu, light the fire for her. We are village people who only know firewood!' Master's mother said, with a short laugh. Neither Ugwu nor Amala laughed.[...] When he started to slice the fibrous pumpkin leaves, she yelped, 'Oh! Oh! Is this how you cut ugu? Alu melu! Make them smaller! The way you are doing it, we might as well cook the soup with the whole leaves.' 'Yes, Mama.' Ugwu began slicing the leaves in strips so thin they would break up in the soup. (p.113)

There is no wonder then that what she cooked had a "too-strong aroma" (p.116) that Ugwu hated.

Food is also a cultural heritage and can be connected with the history of colonization, and Harrison, Richard's anglophile servant who prides himself on serving roast beef and rhubarb crumble, put a considerable effort into proving it: "The first dinner Harrison cooked was a savoury fish, with the beet salad as a starter. A crimson beet stew appeared next to his rice the following evening. 'It is from an American recipe for potato stew that I am making this one,' Harrison said, as he watched Richard eat" (p.87).<sup>13</sup> The connection with colonization is made clear by Odenigbo:

'You know the Europeans took out the insides of an African woman and then stuffed and exhibited her all over Europe?' Odenigbo asked.[...] 'It's the same principle at play,' he said. 'You stuff food, you stuff people. If you don't like what is inside a particular food, then leave it alone, don't stuff it with something else'. (p. 128)

Adichie associates food with sensuality or sexuality, taking the reader back to that tasting and "consuming life" she mentioned about. The three times Mohammed, Olanna's beautiful and gentle ex boyfriend, is present in the story, food and mouth are involved. First, Olanna reminisces the time they were together when "his lips were a sensual curve, lips she had once kissed often during those days when she spent most of her weekends in Kano, eating rice with her fingers in his house" (p.54), and when she encounters him again and she's already Odenigbo's girlfriend, "she led the way to the suite and they sat on the terrace and ate rice and drank cold beer. She touched her glass rim with the tip of her tongue before she sipped" (p.75). Finally, she's still eating when the attacks against the Igbos in the north began: "Olanna was sitting on Mohammed's veranda, drinking

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13 Jaggi, Maya, 'The Master and his houseboy', Guardian, 19 August 2006, p. 14

chilled rice milk, laughing at the delicious cold trickle down her throat, at the stickiness on her lips, when the gateman appeared and asked to speak to Mohammed” (p.171). Same type of direct connection between food and sensuality is noticed in the way Ugwu relates to Olanna and his complete fascination with her:

Ugwu sat down and selected one and closed his eyes as he sucked it, imagining Olanna’s mouth enclosing the same bone. He sucked languidly, one bone after another, and did not bother to tone down the slurpy sounds his mouth made.[...] He had sucked all the bones, and he imagined that the taste of Olanna’s mouth was in his as he started to wash the dishes. The first time he sucked her bones, weeks ago, it was after he saw her and Master kissing in the living room on a Saturday morning, their open mouths pressed together. (p.101)

Moreover, Ugwu associates Olanna herself, her beauty, to something that can be eaten and savored: “She had only a wrapper tied around her chest, and as she walked, he imagined that she was a yellow cashew, shapely and ripe.[...] He knew that if he reached out and touched her face, it would feel like butter, the kind Master unwrapped from a paper packet and spread on his bread” (p.32).

Everything changes once the conflict begins, the overabundance evaporates, and the reader is left with a starving nation peopled by empty stomachs. Even when, in some lucky cases, there is some food, it seems more of a surrogate than real, fulfilling food “Ugwu hated the relief food. The rice was puffy, nothing like the slender grains in Nsukka, and the cornmeal never emerged smooth after being stirred in hot water, and the powdered milk ended up as stubborn clumps at the bottom of teacups” (p.332). The characters suffer dire hunger to the point when “garri soaked in cold water” (p.335) becomes luxury. Even Harrison adapts in wartime to roasting lizards and bush rats “as though they were rack of lamb” (p.452).<sup>14</sup> The loss of daily routines and duties leads to amplify little details, facilities taken for granted like salt or dull moments like mealtimes or the consolation of a cup of tea. Buying food and preparing it is emphasized in this starving landscape. As with the previous plenitude of food, the lack of and the search for it becomes almost obsessive. Any sense of togetherness at a table or of sensuality is lost and replaced often by violence. To receive some food,

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14 Ojinmah, Uwelo, 'No Humanity in War: Chimamanda Adichie's Half of a Yellow Sun', *Journal of Nigeria Studies* 1.2 (Fall 2012), pp. 1-11, p. 5

Olanna has to fight for it: “She felt jostled; she swayed. It was as if they all shoved her aside in one calculated move since she was not one of them. The firm elbow of the elderly man beside her landed painfully on her side as he launched his run into the compound” (p.314). Another type of fight is led by the women who go on 'afia attack' in order to get some food from behind the enemy lines, or Kainene who becomes the food supplier and has to distribute the food to the refugees.

The fifth installment of “The Book” is also dedicated to starvation. After the first sentence where it is mentioned as a theme, the word becomes a hammering presence. It appears eight times at the beginning of each sentence, piercing the conscience of the reader with known images of starving African children and making it the main reason for the Biafra's fall:

He writes about starvation. Starvation was a Nigerian weapon of war. Starvation broke Biafra and brought Biafra fame and made Biafra last as long as it did. Starvation made the people of the world take notice and sparked protests and demonstrations in London and Moscow and Czechoslovakia. Starvation made Zambia and Tanzania and Ivory Coast and Gabon recognize Biafra, starvation brought Africa into Nixon's American campaign and made parents all over the world tell their children to eat up. Starvation propelled aid organizations to sneak-fly food into Biafra at night since both sides could not agree on routes. Starvation aided the careers of photographers. And starvation made the International Red Cross call Biafra its gravest emergency since the Second World War. (p.237)

## Chapter VI

### Language

In 'The Danger of a Single Story' Adichie tells the story of her encounter with her first American roommate who was astonished to discover that she spoke English so well, and was confused to find out that Nigeria had English as its official language. English will be indeed the language in which she writes all of her books. She stresses though the importance of writing African stories, no matter the language:

what is more important in this discourse is not whether African writers should or should not write in English but how African writers, and Africans in general, are educated in Africa. I do not believe in being prescriptive about art. I think African writers should write in whatever language they can. The important thing is to tell African stories.<sup>1</sup>

Adichie uses the English language to write her novel, but also frequently makes a deliberate use of untranslated Igbo sentences and words. The way the author uses language points to her intermediary position in-between worlds and offers her the freedom to engage with both Igbo and English cultures. She makes use of the English language in a way that is influenced by the circumstances and the environment, and therefore is a very different English than that of the colonizer, not an *alien* English but rather a Nigerian English, a familiar and rooted English. English has become her first language, the one in which Adichie acquired education, and she finds herself in a position where she can draw on a wider range of literary traditions and is able to experiment with new ways of expressing her experiences.<sup>2</sup> She declares in one of her interviews that:

the first thing for me is that I belong to a generation of Africans, really, who no longer speak only one language—I go back to Nigeria, and I'm speaking Igbo, and I can't speak two sentences in Igbo without throwing English words in there.[...] But again—it's an English, I've often argued, that's ours. It's not British English. It may have come from there, but we've done things with it.<sup>3</sup>

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1 'Interview with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: Creative Writing and Literary Activism', by Ada Uzoamaka Azodo, Indiana University Northwest, 2008

2 De Mey, Joke, 'The Intersection of History, Literature and Trauma', p. 32

3 'Per Contra Interviews: Miriam N. Kotzin with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie'

Modern Nigerian society is not construed anymore on a paradigm that puts Ibo and standard English one against the other, but on a globalized one in which Ibo, Nigerian Englishes and standard English are blended without being always used in a strictly hierarchical way. Igbo is not only the language of an ethnic group, but belongs to the nation's cultural repertoire; Nigerian English is not the mongrel consequence of colonial rule, but a resource for urban and rural working classes; English is not the tool of oppression, but one of national expression.<sup>4</sup> She states that:

Sometimes we talk about English in Africa as if Africans have no agency, as if there is not a distinct form of English spoken in Anglophone African countries. I was educated in it; I spoke it at the same time as I spoke Igbo. My English-speaking is rooted in a Nigerian experience and not in a British or American or Australian one. I have taken ownership of English.<sup>5</sup>

Reflecting also the multiple dialects of the Igbo group, the language in the novel carries with it a clear sense of Igbo nationhood, since it represents the Biafran war.<sup>6</sup>

*Half of a Yellow Sun* describes a world in which characters are divided from each other by their several languages. If, in the early sixties, the differences between ways of speaking are often comic, by the late sixties, together with the violent secession of Biafra, the clashes between languages become fatal.<sup>7</sup> The characters are also always crossing between languages and, when uttered in Igbo, Adichie uses italicised words although only the bilingual reader can know for sure if the English version is a translation of the Igbo or not: “Yes! Yes! Ojukwu, nye anyi egbe! Give us guns! Iwe di anyi n’obi! There is anger in our hearts!” (p.171) In several cases, the meaning of the Igbo word is clear from the context: “Finally, Jomo looked up at Ugwu. ‘*Afam bu Jomo,*’ he announced, as if Ugwu did not know his name” (p.21). Ibo is also used for terms of address, greetings and interjections, designations or songs: “*Ngwa*, go to the kitchen; there should be something you can eat in the fridge” (p.10); “*Kedu?*’ she asked. “I’m well, mah” (p.30); “chopping *ugu* leaves for her mother’s soup pot” (p.13); “Ugwu was surprised to hear Master’s mother singing

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4 'Attitudes to Language in Literary sources: Beyond Postcolonialism in Nigerian Literature', Emma Dawson&Pierre Larrivée, Keele University, School of Languages and Social Science

5 'Interview with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: Creative Writing and Literary Activism', by Ada Uzoamaka Azodo

6 Ouma, Christopher Ernest Werimo, 'Childhood in Contemporary Nigerian Fiction', p. 147

7 Mullan, John, 'Guardian Book Club: Half of a Yellow Sun - Week 1: Language'

a gently melodious church song: *Nya nya oya mu ga-ana. Na mmetu onu uweya aka*” (p.115). Often, the translation of their meanings is offered by way of explanation of cultural norms: “Her name was Olanna. But Master said it only once; he mostly called her *nkem*, my own” (p.31). When the writer doesn't give any translation, it seems that she wants the reader to not understand, that she intends to make the Western reader and the African Other switch places so that the colonial subject acquires a central and empowered position. The non-Igbo reader is left to make sense of the Igbo from the contextual clues offered in the narrative.<sup>8</sup> Sometimes, the translation of an Igbo expression or idiom it's more obvious: “I said you will give me my money today! [...] You heard me say so because I did not speak with water in my mouth!” (p.263) In another context, Odenigbo tries to justify his infidelity to Olanna by using an Igbo phrase: “self-assured enough to call what he had done a *brief rash lust*” (p.263).<sup>9</sup> Many instances of the use of Nigerian English can also be found: “Good afternoon, *sah!* This is the child” (p.3); “*Mah?* You want anything?’ he asked” (p.32); “We boil our yam with *boh-tah*. Look at your mouth” (p.143). Adichie pays also a very close attention to the different Igbo dialects and accents and it seems that in many cases the main thematic preoccupation is language itself: “His Owerri dialect had a strong rural accent” (p.34); “Her accent was even thicker; it was difficult to make out everything she said” (p.35); “Let me help you here, sir,’ the ticket seller said, in that comically contrived ‘white’ accent that uneducated people liked to put on” (p.36); “Olanna worried, though, that Baby would pick up Adanna’s bush Umuahia accent” (p.383); “You’re so kind,’ the woman told him in an Irish accent” (p.176); “A voice, speaking English with an elegant Hausa accent, announced that the passengers from the London flight should proceed to board the flight for Lagos” (p.178); “Her Igbo had slipped into the dialect that Ugwu heard in Master’s speech when his cousins visited” (p.114); “But I do not want a Wawa woman, and none of those Imo or Aro women, of course; their dialects are so strange I wonder who told them that we are all the same Igbo people” (p.117); “She was speaking Igbo for the first time, and in her

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8 De Mey, Joke, 'The Intersection of History, Literature and Trauma', p. 50

9 Mullan, John, 'Guardian Book Club: Half of a Yellow Sun - Week 1: Language'

Asaba dialect, the F's sounded like W's" (p.393).

The language used often indicates also a social status with standard English being usually associated with middle-class Black Nigerians. The people Odenigbo receives and have intellectual conversations with in his living room are all speaking Standard English (notably British English), particularly in the contexts of politics or societal niceties<sup>10</sup>:

He had always thought that Master's English could not be compared to anybody's, not Professor Ezeka, whose English one could hardly hear, or Okeoma, who spoke English as if he were speaking Igbo, with the same cadences and pauses, or Patel, whose English was a faded lilt. Not even the white man [...] Professor Lehman, with his words forced out through his nose, sounded as dignified as Master. (p. 30)

For Ugwu, language becomes his main organising principle. Having spent his childhood in a village, the new modern life in a university town is confounding at first and he's struggling to appropriate this new world and to widen his experience. Pronunciation of Igbo and of English, translations are used as linguistic tools that help Ugwu understand the new reality, take a stand and build a sense of self. Once in Nsukka, Ugwu has to learn how to deal with a variety of languages as does his master, Odenigbo, who code switches based on the occasion. Odenigbo's language is a mix of Igbo and English, but he addresses Ugwu in Igbo except for the few words with which he calls him: "Where are you, my good man?' He said my good man in English" (p.11). Ugwu, in turn, has to constantly translate and appropriate the language spoken to him in Igbo and through him, the reader experiences the different levels both of English and of Igbo, the various dialects of the latter representative of regional variances that characterize the Igbo world.<sup>11</sup> In the chapters in which Ugwu is the narrator and the reader has access to his consciousness, the boy thinks in clear and complex phrases, translated from his language into English. But in the chapters narrated from Olanna's point of view, Ugwu's English is poor and uncertain: "But it die, mah. The other one don't die" (p.58), as he insists in replying in English to Olanna's Igbo.<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, through Odenigbo's saloon, Ugwu encounters an intellectual and cosmopolitan

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10 'Attitudes to Language in Literary sources: Beyond Postcolonialism in Nigerian Literature'

11 Ouma, Christopher Ernest Werimo, 'Childhood in Contemporary Nigerian Fiction', p. 145

12 Mullan, John, 'Guardian Book Club: Half of a Yellow Sun - Week 1: Language', Guardian, 10 October 2009, p. 6

environment in which people use often code-switching from one Igbo dialect to another and from English to Igbo. When he meets the British-educated Olanna, Odenigbo's fiancée, “He wished that she would stumble in her Igbo; he had not expected English that perfect to sit beside equally perfect Igbo” (p.23). He isn't happy at first with her presence until he hears her speak, a language better even than Master's perfect English: “Here was a superior tongue, a luminous language” (p.30).<sup>13</sup> The houseboy is very self-conscious about his attempt to use the English language and, coming to the university town of Nsukka, he realizes that it is a world partly written: “They went past a sign, ODIM STREET, and Ugwu mouthed street, as he did whenever he saw an English word that was not too long” (p.3). Furthermore, as a professor, Odenigbo gets his information from texts, an approach which is completely different from the way Ugwu hitherto perceived the world. In a house in which every room is filled with books that lie even “piled on tables”, Ugwu undertakes an epistemic journey that brings him “closer and closer to the bookshelf” (p.5). Amidst all those books, Ugwu's journey will be a textual one in which, in order to be able to engage in speech with Odenigbo, he has to decode the written word.<sup>14</sup>

At first, Ugwu desires to emulate his master, to be like him, speak, behave and know as much as Odenigbo does: “Late at night, after Master was in bed, Ugwu would sit on the same chair and imagine himself speaking swift English, talking to rapt imaginary guests, using words like decolonize and pan- African, moulding his voice after Master's, and he would shift and shift until he too was on the edge of the chair” (p. 20).<sup>15</sup> In the same way, as the Biafran conflict unleashes, Ugwu hears Olanna talking about reprisal attacks organized by Igbos: “He liked the way *reprisal attacks* came out of her mouth” (p.207). And when it's his turn to justify the killings, Ugwu uses the same words and tries to pronounce them correctly: “‘We are not like those Hausa people. The reprisal killings happened because they pushed us.’ His *reprisal killings* had come out sounding close to

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13 Ouma, Christopher Ernest Werimo, 'Childhood in Contemporary Nigerian Fiction', p. 153

14 Ouma, Christopher Ernest Werimo, 'Childhood in Contemporary Nigerian Fiction', p. 150

15 Ouma, Christopher Ernest Werimo, 'Childhood in Contemporary Nigerian Fiction', p. 151

hers, he was sure” (p.207).<sup>16</sup> For the boy, the mastery of English language entails a hierarchy, with the pronunciation, tone and cadence of the English words indicating the superiority or inferiority of the person who utters the words. His Master, with the “melody” of his “English-inflected Igbo” (p.21) occupies obviously one of the highest positions.<sup>17</sup> When Odenigbo calls him “You stupid ignoramus!” because Ugwu burned his socks while ironing them, for Ugwu the meaning of the words is lost and alleviated by the sound: “*Stupid ignoramus* slid out of his mouth like music” (p.20).<sup>18</sup>

In a way or another all the characters are concerned with or navigate through various languages, sometimes even in a paradoxical way: Richard, with his love for Nigerian history, comes to understand and speak Igbo: “At the checkpoint, Richard spoke Igbo to the civil defender. She examined their passes and smiled suggestively and Richard smiled back” (p.431). Olanna in exchange is unable to understand the Hausa used by her uncle and his friends: “Olanna sat with them for a while, but their Hausa was too swift, too difficult to follow. She wished she were fluent in Hausa and Yoruba, like her uncle and aunt and cousin were, something she would gladly exchange her French and Latin for” (p.50). Odenigbo, with his anti-Western and anti-colonial ideology, uses English words when he has to speak about the trauma which Olanna went through when she found her own relatives slaughtered: “the *experience* had changed her and made her so much more *inward*. He used *massacre* when he spoke to his friends, but never with her” (p.218).<sup>19</sup> Harrison, Richard's house aid, with his admiration for everything Western, employs a version of forced English that outdoes Pidgin English: “You are not knowing how to bake German chocolate cake?” “You are not knowing what is rhubarb crumble?” (p. 166).<sup>20</sup>

Sometimes the mastering of more than one language can be not only a resource but also a problem. When Olanna, asked by her mother, decides to confront her father about his mistress, she

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16 Mullan, John, 'Guardian Book Club: Half of a Yellow Sun - Week 1: Language'

17 Ouma, Christopher Ernest Werimo, 'Childhood in Contemporary Nigerian Fiction', p. 160

18 Mullan, John, 'Guardian Book Club: Half of a Yellow Sun - Week 1: Language'

19 Mullan, John, 'Guardian Book Club: Half of a Yellow Sun - Week 1: Language'

20 Ikheloa, Ikhide R., 'A Blazing Sun - The Storyteller Returns', Wordsbody, 23 October 2006

has to choose a language. “She would speak mostly in English. It was easy to be formal and cold in English.” But she doesn't manage to express what she intends and ends up saying something completely different: “*My mother*, instead of *Mum*, made it seem as if she had decided to exclude him, as if he had become a stranger who could not possibly be addressed on the same terms, could not be *my father*” (p.254).<sup>21</sup>

Language differences are important markers of ethnic groups in Nigeria. Ethnic differences are remarked upon through crude stereotypes by Susan, Richard’s first lover in Lagos: “She told him the Hausa in the north were a dignified lot, the Igbo were surly and money-loving, and the Yoruba were rather jolly, even if they were first-rate lick-spittles” (p.58). Ethnic differences are also signalled between the mainly Igbo protagonists and Miss Adebayo, Odenigbo's colleague who “was loud” and spoke “rapid, incomprehensible Yoruba” (p.26), or prince Mohammed, Olanna's ex-boyfriend from the north, and his “rapid, coaxing Hausa” (p.173). In the second part, as ethnic tensions rise, the difference between languages takes a dangerous turn. When Olanna and her cousin Arize are asked by a menacing crowd if they are Igbo, Arize starts speaking “fluent, loud Yoruba” (p.155) till the crowd leaves them alone.<sup>22</sup>

Language, the most powerful communication tool, cannot always convey the right meaning. It has been claimed also that often the problem is not of the colonial Other who cannot speak, but of the Western interlocutor who cannot listen, who comes always with a cultural and often stereotyped baggage. Is what Adichie means when she speaks about the principle of 'nkali': “How [the stories] are told, who tells them, when they're told, how many stories are told, are really dependent on power. Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person”.<sup>23</sup> The British, for instance, continue to see Africa through their prejudiced gaze as a dark and violent place. The Western journalists in the novel gave the wrong translation to

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21 Mullan, John, 'Guardian Book Club: Half of a Yellow Sun - Week 1: Language'

22 Mullan, John, 'Guardian Book Club: Half of a Yellow Sun - Week 1: Language'

23 'The Danger of a Single Story', TED: Ideas Worth Spreading

the expression “MAN MUST WHACK”<sup>24</sup>:

'Ancient tribal hatreds,' the *Herald* wrote, was the reason for the massacres. *Time* magazine titled its piece MAN MUST WHACK, an expression printed on a Nigerian lorry, but the writer had taken *whack* literally and gone on to explain that Nigerians were so naturally prone to violence that they even wrote about the necessity of it on the passenger lorries. Richard sent a terse letter off to *Time*. In Nigerian Pidgin English, he wrote, *whack* meant *eat*. (p.166)

In the same way, The Western journalists position themselves as witnesses of the war, but are unable to tell the story properly. Africa remains an abstraction and appears always as a generalized, racist image, as a single story, to the western eye. For instance, when Richard criticizes the colonialism that contributed to the Civil War, he is told that:

the international press was simply saturated with stories of violence from Africa, and this one was particularly bland and pedantic, the deputy editor wrote, but perhaps Richard could do a piece on the human angle? Did they mutter any tribal incantations while they did the killings, for example? Did they eat body parts like they did in the Congo? Was there a way of trying truly to understand the minds of these people? (p.167)

It's obvious that images of the dark, incomprehensible continent are still present in the Western cultural mind and imagination, that there was no possibility for Africans to be similar to them in any way, no possibility of a connection as human equals.

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24 De Mey, Joke, 'The Intersection of History, Literature and Trauma', p. 41

## Conclusion

Adichie talks about the danger of a single story or about the way Africa is reduced to stereotyped images of a violent and dark place with poor people with no agency whatsoever just waiting for the white saviour to come and rescue them. It's an image that can fit properly with what the West likes to think about itself and with the way it likes to justify its actions. And she talks about what it means to be an African writer, a status that always comes with a baggage and has always a political charge to it. She often gives contradictory answers to the question: "Are you an African writer?"

The answer "no" was given

not because I am not proudly African [...] I said 'no' because I have increasingly been troubled by the subtle and not so subtle constraints that citizenship places on writing, because expectations of citizenship often grow narrower and narrower until the form annuls that with which we try to hang our own. [...] because it is based on the great self-indulgence of universalizing one's own experience, because it is a simplistic question that seeks a kind of easy triumphalism. If you say yes, then you get applause and all is well with the world. But it is an applause that is wilfully blind to the layers of meaning and baggage and interpretation that come with it.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, Adichie questions throughout *Half of a Yellow Sun* all the presumptions and prejudices that come with the label African, both from a white or an African readership. Her effort is not in demonstrating through a contrived narrative that everything can be the contrary of what people say or believe, but rather because what is essential in fiction is what H. G. Wells has called "the jolly coarseness of life", and the expectations of what an African writer should be, those imposed on the writer and those self-imposed can often get in the way of these "jolly coarseness". An African writer is believed to never write about a subject that is likely to divide Africans or a subject that portrays Africans in a bad light. He/She should not write about sex and should not bring up feminist issues, since feminism is opposed to Africanness, and African characters should never use some words or behave in some ways. And, finally, an authentic African writer should write in

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1 'The Writer as Two Selves: Reflections on the Private Act of Writing and the Public Act of Citizenship'

indigenous African languages. Against all these imposed and self-imposed definitions, Adichie ponders with the ability of fiction to tell a human story, to create meaning, a meaning that will enable the reader to make connections with “emotive significance” and to produce a “radical truth”.

The author realizes that it is almost impossible for an African novel to be read first as a story of human beings before being read as representing political situation. Nonetheless, for her, writing is all about the magic and the craft process:

I write because I have to, I write because I cannot imagine my life without the ability to write and to imagine and to dream. I write because I love the solitude of writing, because I love the near mystical sense of creating characters who sometimes speak to me. Because I love the possibility of touching another human being with my work, because I spend a large amount of time in the spaces between the imaginary and the concrete. My writing comes from melancholy, from rage, from curiosity, from hope.<sup>2</sup>

And Adichie's work sprouts from this hope that, by adding one more story to those few we know about Africa, we are able to “reject the single story”, to “realize that there is never a single story about any place”, and in doing so, the certainty that we will “regain a kind of paradise”.<sup>3</sup>

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2 'The Writer as Two Selves: Reflections on the Private Act of Writing and the Public Act of Citizenship'

3 'The Danger of a Single Story', TED: Ideas Worth Spreading

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