



Feminizing The War Novel: A Study Of Half Of A Yellow Sun

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Abstract

Half of a Yellow Sun serves as a powerful exploration of the horrors of war and its devastating effects on its victims. The novel introduces a diverse cast of characters, each navigating their own struggles and transformations as they grapple with the war's devastation. Three central narrators guide the narrative: Ugwu, a young village boy who becomes a houseboy; Olanna, Odenigbo's girlfriend, a complex and educated woman dealing with her insecurities; and Richard, an idealistic Englishman deeply in love with Kainene, Olanna's twin sister and a formidable businesswoman. The novel portrays the resilience of the human spirit in the face of overwhelming adversity and offers a poignant reflection on the enduring scars left by conflict. Adichie's portrayal of the characters' resilience underscores the remarkable determination of humanity, even in the face of unimaginable adversity. For Olanna, the end of the war holds the promise of an opportunity to search for her lost twin sister, Kainene. The novel poignantly captures a nation's disintegration and descent into chaos, underscoring the suffering of ordinary people. It emphasizes the significance of everyday details and comforts that were once taken for granted but now assume monumental importance in the context of war. Despite the hardships, the characters continue to love, marry, and seek traces of normalcy amid the chaos.

Keywords: Horrors of war, Nation's disintegration, Struggles and transformations

Eleni Coundouriotis in her book *The People's Right to the Novel: War Fiction in the Postcolony* hails Chimamanda Adichie's novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* for its reinvention of "the genre of domestic fiction by using it to tell the story of war" and, and also for, "feminizing" the war novel in the tradition of women forebearers in Nigeria such as Flora Nwapa and buchi Emecheta (225). Similarly, Jane Bryce in her chapter titled "What is the Country? Reimagining National Space in Women's Writing on the Biafran War" claims that Chimamanda Adichie's novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* belongs to "a wider corpus" of "Nigerian" women's writing on the biafra-Nigeria War that "fundamentally questions, not only the authority of fathers, but [also] the legitimacy of official history by which nationalism is configured" (450).

Half of a Yellow Sun delves into the profound connection between humanity and war throughout the three-year conflict, highlighting the widespread death, hunger, and starvation suffered by millions of Biafrans. The novel also explores the war's devastating effects on women, children, and the elderly, who bore the brunt of the suffering. In 1967, Chukwuemeka Ojukwu declared the secession of the Eastern Region of Nigeria and its independence as the Republic of Biafra, symbolized by a flag depicting half of a rising sun, which inspired Adichie's novel title, "*Half of a Yellow Sun*". The Nigerian government refused to recognize the new republic, leading to the outbreak of the civil war.

The novel commences with the confident and impassioned university professor, Odenigbo, who vehemently criticizes the damage inflicted on Nigeria by the British. He is surrounded by a diverse cast of characters, with a particular focus on three individuals whose perspectives guide the narrative. The narrators include Ugwu, a

young village boy taken in as a houseboy by Odenigbo just before the conflict begins; Olanna, Odenigbo's girlfriend, a beautiful, wealthy, well-educated yet insecure woman; and Richard, the idealistic and compassionate Englishman who is in love with Olanna's twin sister, Kainene, a strong businesswoman. Over the course of the novel, Ugwu undergoes a transformation from a simple teenager with limited literacy skills to an informed young adult writer.

Similarly, the two primary female characters, Olanna and Kainene, transition from peripheral figures in the political discourse to central positions, with one's traumatic experiences and the other's courage and sacrifice embodying the reasons behind the war. The familial connection between Olanna and Kainene, as well as Olanna's romantic relationship with Odenigbo, serves as the nexus around which the story unfolds. The novel can be seen as an exploration of Olanna's trauma stemming from her personal experiences, with each key event structured to connect, in one way or another, to Olanna or her traumatic journey. While Ugwu plays a significant role as a narrator, his actions in the story are somewhat more limited, except for his involvement in the war effort toward the end, primarily functioning as an observer. Richard's part in the novel is contemplative, with his focus centered on Igbo-Ukwu art and his love for Kainene.

In "*Half of a Yellow Sun*," Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie not only narrates historical events but also offers a hopeful social outlook. Within this novel, the African world is depicted in a positive light, showcasing its values, culture, and civilization. Despite being born seven years after the conclusion of the Nigerian Civil War, Adichie authentically portrays Nigerian society. Adichie tells in an interview that:

I wrote this novel because I wanted to write about love and war, because I grew up in the shadow of Biafra, because I lost both grandfathers in the Nigeria-Biafra war, because I wanted to engage with my history in order to make sense of my presence, because many of the issues that led to the war remain unresolved in Nigeria today, because my father has tears in his eyes when he speaks of losing his father,... because I don't ever want to forget. I have always known that I would write a novel about Biafra. (P.S. Section, HYS 2)

The endeavor to construct a novel addressing Nigeria's political imbalance, which ultimately led to the historic civil war, has proven to be an irresistible challenge and a compelling necessity for numerous Nigerian novelists. Despite Nigeria gaining independence in 1960, the mid to late 1960s marked a period of disillusionment with the corruption and ethnic chauvinism perpetuated by the initial generation of Nigerian politicians. In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, we encounter an unnamed narrator grappling with the task of chronicling the story of Biafra. However, by the novel's conclusion, we come to realize that the author of the book *The World Was Silent When We Died* is, in fact, Ugwu, the illiterate houseboy introduced on the first page of the novel. The novel starts and ends with him. Adichie says;

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 humor. I really wanted him to be the soul of the book, the character that held everyone together (Memory, Witness, and War, Book Forum 37).

All the main characters, Ugwu, Odenigbo, Olanna, Kainene and Richard, develop as the story progresses. Particularly, Ugwu develops from the illiterate and clumsy little boy to a resourceful writer and he learned everything from his master. His master gives importance to education and Odenigbo says, "Education is a priority! How can we resist exploitation if we don't have the tool to understand exploitation?" (HYS11). Odenigbo gives Ugwu books to read and Ugwu goes to school, where he makes quick progress. He became a part of Odenigbo's family. As a writer, Ugwu approaches the war from a lot of different angles: from a personal point of view, a historical, economic, political, international one, and a poetic one. Ugwu's writings do not supply us with any new information, but it does give us his interpretation of the past, and of how the past should be represented. This mirrors Adichie's approach to her novel. Like Adichie, Ugwu mixes the personal and the political, with the inclusion of "Olanna's anecdote about the story of woman with the calabash" (HYS 82).

Another way in which Adichie conveys her perspective on Biafra's involvement in the war is through the book *The World Was Silent When We Died*, whose title alone criticizes the West's role in the conflict. This book serves as a crucial instrument in Adichie's narrative about the war, presenting a metatext divided into eight parts that offer explicit historical information and verifiable facts. Furthermore, the line of reasoning presented

in the book forms the foundation for analysing and interpreting the political views of the characters in the main narrative, reinforcing their key ideas. The historical events covered include the two military coups of 1966, the subsequent massacres of Igbo people in various parts of the country, the declaration of secession by the Igbo-dominated Eastern Region, and the ensuing war. Additionally, the metatext includes anecdotes from events within the main narrative, such as the section detailing the two coups and the Igbo massacre in 1966, which is introduced by the second installment of the book, discussing the 1914 amalgamation of Northern and Southern Nigeria and the origins of ethnic rivalry. Structurally, the metatext provides an alternative method of flashback, offering background information about Nigeria's history without disrupting the narrative's flow. Similar to the main narrative, Adichie employs the same realist technique in the metatext by blending factual and fictional details, including the reference to the episode of the head in the calabash that appears in the narrative.

The lives of these main characters—Ugwu, Olanna, Odenigbo, and their daughter Baby—unfold in Nsukka, in the south, which becomes the epicentre of the Nigerian Civil War. Adichie delves into the political conflict arising from the attempted secession of the south eastern provinces, predominantly inhabited by the Igbo ethnic group, as the self-proclaimed Republic of Biafra. The novel delves into the economic, ethnic, cultural, and religious tensions among Nigeria's diverse peoples, exploring the emotional and psychological ramifications of the conflict to present a multifaceted portrayal of this war.

During the war, Olanna visits her uncle's home at Kano. Where she witness the bodies of her family members and she "felt a watery queasiness in her bowels before the numbness spread over her and stopped at her feet" (HYS 147). She feels numb and completely incapable to participate emotionally and to consider the death of her relatives 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" (HYS 156). It is the paralysis both physical and mental that keeps her bed ridden 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" (HYS 156). Olanna manages to tell Odenigbo in detail the trauma she experienced in Kano, but her lips grow gradually heavy and speaking becomes 'a labour'. In telling him though, she is 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" (HYS 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. 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" (HYS 157). The trauma experienced by Olanna during the episode of collective violence are very painful.

Subsequently, Nigeria declared war on Biafra with the aim of annexation. The Nigerians received arms support from Britain and Russia, allowing them to advance against the initially confident Biafrans. This situation led to the evacuation of Nsukka, prompting Olanna, Odenigbo, Ugwu, and Baby to relocate to Abba and eventually end up in the refugee town of Umuahia. As the war dragged on and Biafra's resources dwindled, their living conditions deteriorated significantly. They grappled with severe food shortages, constant air raids, and a pervasive atmosphere of paranoia. Olanna endured an exceptionally challenging ordeal in the refugee camp.

Adichie also provides the perspective of an outsider, the Englishman Richard Churchill, who, despite belonging to the colonizing power, developed a deep affinity for Biafra due to his love for Kainene. Alongside Odenigbo, he remained one of the most optimistic supporters of the Biafran cause. Adichie intentionally crafted Richard as a well-rounded character to avoid falling into the trap of a single narrative. He was the sole major non-Igbo character and differed from his fellow countrymen in that he was not opinionated but rather emotionally vulnerable. Richard witnessed the tragic murder of Igbo people at Kano airport. He had spent a few minutes conversing with the customs officer named Nnaemeka, who was tragically shot along with a dozen others solely because they were Igbo. "He almost missed his flight because, as the other passengers walked shakily to the plane, he stood aside, vomiting" (HYS 153).

Observing their violent deaths up close left Richard deeply traumatized. As the situation in war-ravaged Biafra progressively deteriorated in the novel, scenes of starvation and violence became pervasive. Richard began to

write articles shedding light on the suffering of the Biafrans. Then, Ugwu fell in love with a girl named Eberechi but was forcibly conscripted into the army. He participated in battles and was tragically involved in the gang rape of a bar girl. In a subsequent battle, he sustained severe injuries, and everyone believed he had perished. Umuahia fell to the Nigerians, leading Olanna's family to live with Kainene and Richard, with Kainene overseeing a refugee camp. Later on, they discovered Ugwu in a hospital and brought him home. Starvation became a pressing issue within the camp, prompting Kainene to make a daring decision to cross enemy lines in search of food. However, she did not return even after the war concluded.

The consequences of the Nigeria-Biafra conflicts are often quantified in terms of strategic and economic losses. The civil war resulted in substantial losses in terms of lives, finances, and infrastructure. Hunger and disease emerged as significant contributors to the increased death toll. Yet, it is important to recognize that the most affected and overlooked were the marginalized individuals: women, children, and the elderly, who endured the most suffering and made the greatest sacrifices. Their plight often goes unrecognized and unacknowledged. The most notable aspect of the civil war was that the extent of its impact could have been mitigated if not for the politicization of relief efforts by the warring parties and international humanitarian organizations. This resulted in widespread hunger, starvation, deprivation, and human rights violations, especially among the vulnerable segments of the population, setting a grim precedent in the country's and Africa's history. On a general note, the Nigeria-Biafra war 'was a horrific and traumatic experience whose shock waves felt through the Nigerian federation.' (Johnson 149).

The novel offers glimpses of a nation falling apart and plunging into chaos: individuals on the roadside, suffering from hunger and illness yet unable to access medication; families torn apart; the emergence of feeding centres and makeshift hospitals; rationing of petrol; relief food being brought in by planes. As the daily routines and responsibilities unravel, the narrative shifts its focus towards minute details and everyday objects, shedding light on previously taken-for-granted comforts and seemingly trivial moments that now assume an outsized significance. Central to this transformation are the themes of food rationing and preparation, with the portrayal of starvation being so vivid that it drives women to undertake risky journeys like the 'afia attack' to secure even a small amount of food from behind enemy lines. The fifth chapter of *The Book* by Ugwu is also dedicated to starvation:

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 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. (HYS 237)

Amidst the camp's turmoil, children fall victim to kwashiorkor, a protein deficiency disease that manifests with distended bellies, pale skin, and reddish hair. Despite this chaos, people continue to experience love and marriage, striving to adapt to the altered pace of life while maintaining a semblance of normalcy. The author firmly believes in the remarkable resilience of human beings, even in the face of terrible adversity. Ironically, as the Biafran War evolves into a significant moment in political history, its political and historical aspects become less significant to characters like Odenigbo, Olanna, Ugwu, and other Biafrans. What truly matters are the facts that directly impact their daily survival: hunger, fear, and suspicion. For Olanna, the end of the war holds a singular significance – the opportunity to search for her lost twin sister, Kainene, who remains stranded behind enemy lines.

Eventually, Biafra surrenders, and Nigeria is reunified. Both Richard and Olanna tirelessly search for Kainene but find no trace of her. Olanna's family returns to Nsukka to discover their house looted and their savings depleted. Olanna is grateful for the precious moments she spent with her twin sister, Kainene, before her departure, holding onto the hope that Kainene will one day reunite with them in a peaceful Nigeria after the gruelling three-year war. Each of the novel's main characters must find their own path to cope with the traumatic aftermath of the horrors endured during the war, with some experiencing significant transformations. *Half of a Yellow Sun* undoubtedly reflects the dedication of a committed African female writer, with the women portrayed in Adichie's work demonstrating remarkable resilience as they navigate their daily struggles while fulfilling multiple roles. These portrayals highlight the arbitrary nature of gender roles and, by extension, underscore the women's capacity to excel in diverse roles.

The theme of war serves as a gateway to a broader exploration of humanity, with characters grappling with issues such as war, trauma, hunger, career, and family, among others. Unlike the constraints that historians face in adhering to factual accuracy, the novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* offers an unbounded narrative that presents a genuine account of the Nigerian Civil War. It is not merely an enthralling story but also a profound exploration of human experiences and understanding.

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