

Research Article

Muffled Voices and Scarred Souls: Revisiting the Nuances and Trauma of the Biafran War in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun*

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Abstract

In the course of human civilization, there has been many conflicts which heralded the doom of mankind and raised the pressing concern of unprecedented and grim events like wars, attacks, massacres etc. Such events based on different factors like race, gender and ethnicity can not only spark violence but it can also traumatize an individual and society collectively. With the second highest death toll of all African conflicts, the Nigerian Civil War, also known as the Biafran War, is deemed as an unfortunate conflict. This research paper endeavors to depict the dehumanizing impacts of the Biafran War and the trauma that not only clutched the victims till the end of their lives, but was also passed to the upcoming generations in the form of transgenerational trauma. It is an attempt to depict that trauma can impinge damage in the life of not only an individual but also in whole community. This research paper also scrutinizes themes like ethnic cleansing, violence and futility of war. To project these issues, the paper is structured on the axes of trauma to delineate the inescapable and scarring fate of the characters of the novel.

Keywords- Trauma, War, Ethnic Cleansing

Introduction

“How is it they live in such harmony, the billions of stars, when most men can barely go a minute without declaring war in their minds?” – Thomas Aquinas

In literary discourse, there has been explosion of deliberations on the fatal impact and consequences of wars on human civilization. The Nigerian Civil War is among one such gut wrenching events. Many writers from different corners of the world have brought in light the agony of victims who grapple with the dreadful consequences of war.

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The emergence of War Literature paved way for many voices which presented the sinking trauma faced by different strata and sections of society. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is also one of these voices belonging to the third generation of Nigerian writers. Her whose works delve into a wide variety of issues like race, gender, quest for identity, violence, diaspora etc. With her strong literary prowess, Adichie has given exponential contribution in bringing African Literature into mainstream. Madhu Krishnan concurs that the third generation of writers of Nigerian Literature represent “the striving of a younger generation to remember the trauma of the past and to forge a

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sense of kinship and identity through their shared connection in community.” (Krishnan 187) Combining facts and fiction in her novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), Adichie has recapitulated the profound and gruesome tragedy of this war which consumed the lives of more than one million people. Her oeuvre is the continuation of the brutalities of Nigerian Civil War which was earlier chronicled by renowned writers like Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe. Praising her work, Chinua Achebe remarks, “We do not usually associate wisdom with beginners, but here is a new writer endowed with the gift of ancient storytellers.” He further acknowledges the writer’s fearless attitude in bringing the horrors of this war by stating that she is a writer who came fully made. The novel has garnered a lot of attention from readers and critics all across the globe. A survey of critical scholarship available on this work depicts that critics have majorly focused on history, violence, bildungsroman characters, collective consciousness and trauma. Scholars have peered at it through different lenses like postcolonialism, diaspora, feminism, cultural studies etc. In one of her interviews, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie mentioned that she did not choose to write about Biafra. Instead, Biafra chose her. Adichie was born after the Biafran War but she always felt its horrid aftermath in her life. She lost both her grandfathers during this devastating event and felt as though her family’s trajectory was “sharply divided and changed by the war” (“Sahara TV,” 00:00:25-00:00:32). She belongs to one of the many people who did not bear the brunt of this war but they could identify with it as transgenerational trauma. Through her quill, she attempts to bring out the billowing pain, suffering and the quest of establishing a collective identity in the form of the independent Republic of Biafra. She expresses this obligation as a writer in the same interview by saying that it feels as though her ancestors wanted her to do it.

Praising this ability of Adichie to capture these atrocities, a book review by *The New Times* states she has captured a time when belonging of every individual is contested in a new nation and “how powerfully we can love; how easily we can kill; how human we can be when a war dedicates itself to stripping our humanity from us.”

Omelo Ojinmah has made this observation about Adichie that “her fictionalized but masterful tale of events preceding the war, evokes powerful memories of Nigeria’s cloyed past that still beclouds and haunts the present.” (Ojinmah 1)

Nuances of War

Half of a Yellow Sun deals with the horrifying effects on the Nigerian Civil War primarily on the lives of the Olanna, Odenigbo, Kainene, Richard and Ugwu. The fate of these characters takes an unfortunate turn when havoc is wreaked because of ethnic clashes and their lives are disrupted with the shadows of this war lurking at them throughout their lives. The novel progresses to describe the ethnic tension that started brewing between three ethnic groups- Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo. It is followed by a bloody scenario of massacres, rapes, slaughtering of people based on their ethnicity, air raids and starvation. Since these brutalities were afflicted on Igbo people, they decided to stand for themselves and it led to the secession of the Republic of Biafra.

Elaine Scarry in her book titled *Body in Pain* states that war is the most obvious analogue to torture. According to her, in both war and torture “there is a destruction of civilization in its most elemental form” (61). She further explicates that the ultimate goal of the person inflicting the torture is to make the body present by destroying it “empathetically and crushingly” and in doing so, the voice is also demolished and made absent. This quote can be well employed to one of the scenes in the novel where Igbo people are brutally massacred. There are bodies lying around with torn limbs and blood gushing through them. This merciless perpetration of violence not only

destroys the bodies of victims but also muffles their voices. Laura Sjoberg claims that “while war has gendered causes, gendered practices, and gendered consequences, it is also lived and experience in gendered ways” (252). Women are expected to be the providers for both their families and community. As war ensues, Kainene starts running a refugee camp and Olanna begins to help her sister in the camp. She also imparts education to children. But in these harrowing atrocities, women heavily bear the brunt of pain as their bodies also become the site of violence. Adichie describes this portrayal of women as commodities even in day-to-day life by penning this incident where Olanna is groped by Chief Okonji,

“She was used to this, being grabbed by men who walked around in a cologne – drenched entitlement, with the presumption that, because they were powerful and found her beautiful, they belonged together. She pushed him back, finally, and felt vaguely sickened at how her hands sank into his soft chest (33).

In another episode, a group of soldiers mercilessly pin down a bargirl and rape her. They pretend to be oblivious to her numerous pleas. She could not defend herself. Broken and helpless, she looks at them with a calm hate in her eyes.

The narrative of the novel is constantly interrupted by a book titled “The World was Silent When We Died”. The epilogue of this book titled “Were You Silent When We Died?” echoes the horrid spectacle of starvation that took its toll on the lives of children during the war:

Did you see photos in sixty- eight?

Of children with their hair becoming rust.

Sickly patches nestled on those small heads,

Then falling off, like rotten leaves on dust?

Imagine children with arms like toothpicks,

With footballs for bellies and skin stretched thin.

It was kwashiorkor- difficult word,

A word that was not quite ugly enough, a sin (375).

The West saw widely propagated images of children reduced to skeletons because of protein deficiency. Food was scarce and there was a lot of hue and cry of people who were pining to feed their children.

Trauma

The term “trauma” generally means a physical injury by an extrinsic agent or the emotional response to a disturbing event. Cathy Caruth in her book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* talks about Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism* where he states that “history, like trauma, is never simply one’s own, that history is precisely the way we were implicated in each other’s traumas,” (25) This quote suggests the universalist interpretation of trauma that damages the psyche and evokes a shared response across time. This also indicates trauma’s inherent transhistorical or intergenerational quality which means that it can be transmitted to future

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generations across time. This unfortunate inheritance was passed on to the generation of Adichie. Cathy Caruth positions Freud's understanding of the concept of trauma which is described by him in another work *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). Freud has observed that trauma is "the wound of the mind- the breach in mind's experiences of time, self and the world- is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event" (3). It is something far more complex. A trauma can be individual, communal and even gender based in nature. *Half of a Yellow Sun* is a tragic account of all forementioned natures of trauma as the characters are seared with personal scars on their minds, the aspirations of Igbo people are crushed and Nigeria is bathed in blood of innocent people.

Edward Tick in his book *War and the Soul* states, "Though hostilities cease and lives on, and though loved ones yearn for their healing, veterans often remain drenched in the imagery and emotion of war for decades and sometimes for their entire lives" (1). Ugwu, who used to work as a houseboy was forcefully recruited in army. Upon returning to his village, he finds that his sister has been raped and has also lost one eye in an attempt to save herself. He finds his village in ruins and finds himself unable to cope with the aftermaths of war. The victims are always trapped with a feeling of trepidation. When Olanna and her fellow passengers see a mother carrying the severed head of her baby in a calabash, they are traumatized. Olanna cannot bring herself to forget this gut-wrenching incident which is an expression of collective trauma. In another episode, a shell-shocked soldier attacks her to snatch food items.

According to Freud, these traumatic experiences keep imposing themselves in form of nightmares. A close examination of the novel reveals that this notion of Freud is applicable to the character of Olanna. Her family survives the lethal air raid and she constantly has nightmares about the raids, "She had a recurring dream: She forgot about Baby and ran to the bunker and after the bombs had fallen, she tripped on the burnt body of a child with its features so blackened that she could not be certain it was Baby. The dream haunted her" (262). Olanna does not only face nightmares but also loses complete control over her body. Her legs become paralysed and she is unable to walk for a long period of time.

Seretha D. Williams, in her writeup "Dark Swoops: Trauma and Madness in *Half of a Yellow Sun*" opines that the "black swoops" that are observed by Olanna are not merely the symbols of "temporary madness" because of traumatic experience but it can be interpreted as the traumatic legacy of Nigeria's colonisation. In *Trauma: A Genealogy* Ruth Leys mentions Jean Laplanche's formulation, "What defines psychological trauma is not any general quality of the psyche, but the fact that psychological trauma comes from within" (21) which is "an isolated and encysted interior". This can be clearly seen in many characters of the novel.

Conclusion

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, in her moving work, has delineated that grotesque events like war are futile and do nothing but drag human civilization into a dark abyss of loss. Violence of war can overwhelm people and leave indelible imprints of their minds. Such events can not only traumatise people but can shatter their identity and affiliation as well. It can traumatise society in many contours and forms. Many times, this trauma is unacknowledged by victims and undoubtedly by the perpetrators of violence. But Adichie affirms that suppressing this traumatising history is not the solution, but confronting it is.

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