

Ruptured Nationhood and the Politics of Collective Memory in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Half of a Yellow Sun

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Abstract

This paper examines the representation of ruptured nationhood and the politics of collective in the memory in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Half of a Yellow Sun (2006) . By drawing on memory studies , postcolonial theory , and trauma narrative, so the paper argues that Adichie deploys strategic remembrance as simultaneously a literary and a political act - reconstructing the Nigeria's Biafra War (1967–1970) as a site of contested national identity and unresolved mourning. Although close textual analysis and this study demonstrates how the novel unsettles official historiography by foregrounding subaltern testimony and the entanglement of personal loss with collective catastrophe . This paper try to contend that narrative of Adichie intervention constitutes a form of counter - memory it challenges postcolonial amnesia and demands the accountability for historical atrocities . in order to illuminate the novel's epistemic and ethical dimensions , this analysis draws on Paul Connerton's theory of social memory, Homi Bhabha's account of the nation as narration, and Cathy Caruth's theorization of trauma - frameworks whose convergence , this paper argues, is not merely additive but structurally necessary: where Connerton maps how communities encode the past in embodied practice, Bhabha identifies the narrative fissures through which that past destabilizes national coherence, and Caruth accounts for what resists encoding altogether.

Keywords: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Half of a Yellow Sun, collective memory, nationhood, Biafra, postcolonial trauma, counter-memory.

الهوية الوطنية الممزقة وسياسات الذاكرة الجماعية في رواية "نصف شمس صفراء" لتشيماماندا
نغوزي أديتشي

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الملخص:-

تتناول هذه الدراسة تمثيل تنشيطي الأمة وسياسات الذاكرة الجمعية في رواية (نصف شمس صفراء Half of a Yellow Sun، ٢٠٠٦) للكاتبة تشيماماندا نغوزي أديتشي. وانطلاقاً من دراسات الذاكرة، ونظرية ما بعد الاستعمار، وسرديات الصدمة، تجادل الدراسة بأن أديتشي توظف التذكّر الاستراتيجي بوصفه فعلاً أدبياً وسياسياً في آن واحد، إذ تعيد بناء حرب بيفرا النيجيرية (١٩٦٧-١٩٧٠) باعتبارها فضاءً تتنازع فيه تصورات الهوية الوطنية وتظل فيه مظاهر الحداد غير محسومة. ومن خلال تحليل نصّي دقيق، تبين

الدراسة أن الرواية تُزعزع السردية التاريخية الرسمية عبر إبراز شهادات الفئات المهمشة (التابع/المستضعف) والكشف عن التشابك العميق بين فقدان الفردي والكارثة الجمعية. كما ترى الدراسة أن التدخل السردية الذي تقدمه أديتشي يُشكل نمطاً من الذاكرة المضادة (Counter-memory)، إذ يتحدى حالة النسيان التي فرضتها مرحلة ما بعد الاستعمار، ويطالب بالمساءلة عن الفظائع والانتهاكات التاريخية. ولإبراز الأبعاد المعرفية والأخلاقية للرواية، تستند هذه الدراسة إلى نظرية بول كونرتون في الذاكرة الاجتماعية، ومفهوم هومي ك. بابا للأمة بوصفها سرّداً، وتنظير كاثي كاروث للصدمة. وتؤكد الدراسة أن تلاقي هذه الأطر النظرية ليس مجرد جمع بين مقاربات مختلفة، بل هو ضرورة بنيوية؛ فبينما يوضح كونرتون كيفية التي تُشفّر بها المجتمعات الماضي عبر الممارسات المتجسدة، يكشف بابا عن التشققات السردية التي يُزعزع من خلالها ذلك الماضي تماسك الأمة، في حين تقسّر كاروث ما يستعصي على الترميز والتمثيل، أي ذلك البعد الصدمي الذي يقاوم الإدماج في الذاكرة والسرد.

الكلمات المفتاحية: تشيماماندا نغوزي أديتشي، نصف شمس صفراء، الذاكرة الجمعية، الأمة، بيافرا، صدمة ما بعد الاستعمار، الذاكرة المضادة.

1. Introduction;

In post colonial settings literature has always been one of the most important archives of collective memory and in such settings the official histories often marginalize, distort or erase the experience of marginalized communities. The narrative of history in the African tradition is not simply a narrative of description it is a politics of resistance to the silences that are imposed by colonial , postcolonial state formations. Half of a Yellow Sun (2006) by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie stands at a crucial juncture in this tradition , delivering a carefully rendered fictionalized account of the Nigeria- Biafra War, which killed one or three million people, mostly through starvation and systematic killing of Igbo people in southeastern Nigeria.

Even though the Biafra War has been important in history, it has not been extensively discussed in the Nigerian national discourse. The war was over by 1970, and successive Nigerian governments adopted a forgetfulness' policy which can be summed up with the slogan 'No Victor, No Vanquished.' As Chukwuemeka Ike and Isidore Okpe who have pointed out, this institutional amnesia was a collective psychic wound that literature has been particularly suited to handle. Adichie's novel is interventionist in this war of memory, transforming it through the interlocking narratives of individuals whose own stories are a microcosm of the larger trauma of a divided country divided by ethnicity and colonialism.

In this paper I closely read Half of a Yellow Sun to consider how Adichie frames , constructs, politicizes and mobilizes collective memory as a narrative technique. More specifically, the book examines three interconnected aspects of the text – (1) nationhood as a fragile and contested entity, (2) politics of memory as a form of counter-historical agency, and (3) witnessing – the gendered and subaltern production of alternative historiographies. The paper is structured around a

literature review and a textual analysis and discussion, and a synthesis of the results into a theoretical and practical frame.

2. Literature Review

Adichie's novel is thematically and formally rich and has received a great deal of scholarly attention since its publication. The text has been read from a variety of critical perspectives such as postcolonial theory, feminist literary theory, trauma studies and the sociology of memory. This paper traces the boundaries of this scholarly field, discusses important work and situates the missing elements to be tackled by the current study.

The theme of the novel's relation to historical memory and postcolonial identity is a recurring theme in the criticism. Nnolim (2010) contends that Adichie is engaged in a literary nationalism among the Igbo as the use of fiction is an attempt to retrieve a history that has been demoted by state discourse. Likewise, Uwakweh (2013) interprets the novel as a process of 'testimonial recovery,' where literature is seen as a compensating archive for communities whose stories have been forgotten. Critics highlight the moral call to action that drives Adichie's narrative project, but don't fully develop the mechanisms of politicized memory in the text. The novel has been read in ways that have been fruitful by invoking trauma theory. Taking off from Caruth's (1996) foundational work, Osei-Bonsu (2014) reads *Half of a Yellow Sun* as a trauma narrative that embodies the familiar elements of traumatic repetition, fragmentation, and belated witness. Osei-Bonsu is conscious of the novel's structural decisions, such as the non-linear narrative and the shifting between narrative voices, which he sees as mimicking the temporal warping of traumatic experience. This analysis is convincing, but it universalizes trauma to the extent of making it difficult to see its historically and politically specific nature in the Nigerian context.

Scholars of postcolonial theory have dealt with the issue of nation and nationhood as well as the discontents. Nwosu (2015) calls to mind Homi Bhabha's idea of national narration to suggest that the novel shows the nation as a fiction, not natural or inevitable, but a performance. In this reading, the Biafran secession is seen not only as a political event but as an epistemological rupture that highlights the paradoxes that the colonial project of 'Nigeria' constructs. Theoretically, Nwosu is an astute reader of the text but he is not sensitive enough to gender as a dimension of national and historical consciousness, in that he mostly focuses on male characters.

Christian Feminism and this has been a topic of feminist scholarship. Nfah-Abbenyi (2016) and Boehmer (2018) suggest that it is a conscious attempt to focus on women's experiences, and a critique of the male-centric historiography of the masculine. In particular, Olanna is a character whose role is to act as a

'memory-keeper' , as Nfah- Abbenyi describes as a feminist epistemology that breaks the silence of the feminist war experience. Even though this is a convincing argument, it does not adequately address the class dimensions of the production of memory in the novel – the relationship between the privileged intellectuals and the more marginalized experiences of the rural and working - class characters . While some of the concepts developed in memory studies are very relevant and have been used in other works, the discipline has not been systematically applied to Adichie's novel . Although some of the concepts developed in memory studies are very relevant, they have not been systematically applied to Adichie's novel. Connerton's theory of 'habit memory' and 'cognitive memory', and his exploration of how societies pass on memory through the ritual and communal performance of bodies , offers a way of making sense of the ritual and communal aspect of memory in the novel , which has so far been largely ignored in scholarship . In the framework of this study , the present study will provide a more complex explanation of the process of the construction and contestation of collective memory in Half of a Yellow Sun.

3. Analysis and Discussion

3.1 Nationhood as a Fractured Construct

Adichie's novel consistently frames the nation as an artifice — a colonial invention that imposed arbitrary borders over heterogeneous ethnic communities whose historical relationships were far more complex than the cartographic imagination of British colonialism could accommodate. The opening sections of the novel, set in the early 1960s at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, present a world of postcolonial optimism in which characters like Odenigbo speak the language of pan-African solidarity and Igbo intellectual renaissance. Yet this optimism is shadowed from the outset by the structural contradictions of the Nigerian state, particularly the ethnic tensions that would erupt in the massacres of 1966 and the subsequent war.

The representation of the January 1966 coup and its aftermath is particularly significant. Adichie renders these events not through political abstraction but through their human consequences, particularly the fate of Igbo people in the north of Nigeria who were targeted by retributive violence. The scene in which Ugwu's cousin describes the massacres — 'They killed the Igbo people; they killed them like chickens' — enacts a testimonial logic in which subaltern witnessing supplements and complicates the official record. The comparison to 'chickens' is not merely rhetorical; it encodes the dehumanization that was both a precondition and a consequence of the violence, resonating with Hannah Arendt's analysis of how genocide requires the prior reduction of its victims to less-than-human status.

The declaration of Biafran independence in 1967, as represented in the novel, is thus not simply a political act but a metaphysical one — an attempt by a people to reconstitute their humanity and their right to collective self-determination in the face of state-sanctioned violence. Adichie's treatment of this moment is carefully ambivalent: she does not romanticize Biafran nationalism, acknowledging its internal contradictions and the ways in which it reproduced some of the exclusionary logic of the Nigerian state it opposed. Instead, she presents it as an understandable, if ultimately tragic, response to the failure of the postcolonial nation-state to protect its most vulnerable citizens.

3.2 The Politics of Counter-Memory

The novel's image of the nation is riven with divisions and ambiguity; so, too, is its view of memory. The issue of historical remembrance is thematized by the meta-fictional element of 'the book within the book,' a manuscript that the British character Richard is writing, and which is first called 'The World Was Silent When We Died.' The content of this title comes from a real appeal by the Biafran government to the international community, which serves as a biting critique of the lack of awareness of the international community of African plight. This is not something that's lost on the reader, and Adichie eventually gives the manuscript to the house boy, Ugwu, who has become a soldier in the former colonial power, in a gesture towards the democratization of historical narrative.

This meta-fictional move contains one of the key arguments of the novel: "The politics of who tells history is always connected to what history is told. The Biafra War history in the world's memory, if any, has been shaped mostly by the Western narrative constructed by journalists and humanitarian organizations, which have tended to focus on famine and refugeeism, thereby concealing the political aspects of the war and the agency of Biafran actors. The novel's title requires Adichie to reclaim that agency and to write Biafran characters not as victims, but as thinking, feeling, political, and ethical actors who have complicated political and ethical commitments.

This is especially significant in regards to the character of Olanna. This experience of witnessing the aftermath of an ethnic massacre (namely witnessing her cousin's severed head, a scene that haunts the novel in several ways, especially in terms of the novel's temporalities and the structural repetitiveness of traumatic memory) is the most traumatic image in the novel. However, Adichie doesn't make Olanna a victim of this experience; rather, it makes Olanna's ability to remember her moral authority. By resisting the forgetting of the dead (naming, storytelling, bearing witness), she becomes a counter-memorial agent in the context of official amnesia.

3.3 Gendered Witnessing and Subaltern Testimony

The use of multiple focalizes , Ugwu, Olanna and Kainene , is a conscious attempt to witness in a gendered and classed way , thus shifting the male-gender and elite perspectives of traditional historiography. In general, military and political history focuses on men and the leading personalities, “Abundant attention is paid to the narratives of men and to the powerful, dominant voices of war leaders” (163), while Adichie's novel consistently moves away from these privileged and dominant voices to tell the stories of women, servants, and those who live in the countryside and are most directly affected by the devastations of war. The transformation of Ugwu from houseboy to soldier to witness is noteworthy. His last piece of writing, which is now known be the work of the same author as *The World Was Silent When We Died* that is a symbolic appropriation of historical narrative by the subaltern subject. But Adichie is not idolizing this reclamation; Ugwu's role in a gang rape during the war makes his moral role as a witness more complicated, indicating that the novel is aware of the fact that sometimes a victim can also be a perpetrator, and that the ethics of testimony becomes inextricable from the ethics of action .

Another formally and thematically important movement is Kainene's disappearance at the end of the novel. She disappears from the ending, she never gets caught up in a trading mission and is never seen again a state for many war victims, whose fates are left unknown and unrecorded. Kainene's story's failure to be resolved within the story is emblematic of Kainene's failure in official historiography to account for the many deaths and disappearances that the ‘No Victor, No Vanquished’ policy aimed to bury. By that way the formal irresolution of the novel is also a political statement.

3. Theoretical and Practical Frameworks

The analysis above is informed by and combines three theoretical frameworks that together account for the novel's engagement with nationhood, memory and testimony.

Firstly Paul Connerton's (1989) structural approach to the construction and maintenance of social memory provides an explanation for how communities remember and pass on collective memory in the forms of commemorative acts corporeal practices, and the repetition of narratives. Connerton distinguishes between ‘official’ commemorative culture, which serves the interests of dominant groups and unofficial memories which are often somatic and which can be found in the body and practice of communities, whose histories have been suppressed. This structure helps to shed light on how Adichie's characters not only carry the war of their minds but also in their bodies through Olanna's recurring visions Ugwu's physical scars and the "gloomy morbidity" that governs domestic life in the wake of the war.

Secondly, the novel criticizes the Nigerian nation through Homi Bhabha's (1990) concept of the nation as narration. Bhabha is against the idea of the nation as a pre-given reality and instead sees it as a discursive production, produced through repeated narration. This narration is constantly questioned and internally divided – official nationalist rhetoric is a process that generates a national identity that is unified and homogeneous, but this unity is always challenged by the heterogeneous people in whose name the nation speaks. Adichie's novel can be seen as a prolonged dramatization of this disintegration, revealing the ethnic, class, gender tensions that threaten the myth of national unity in Nigeria.

Third, Cathy Caruth's (1996) trauma theory helps to shed light on the temporal and representational aspects of the novel's historical involvement with violence. Trauma is, according to Caruth, a unique form of historical experience, marked by belatedness, repetition, and an inability to grasp the whole experience. This theory takes into account the novel's non-linearity and its frequent return to the most traumatic scenes, which implies that this formal approach is not only stylistic but also epistemological, in the sense that it represents the particular manner in which traumatic memory cannot be contained in narrative.

Looking at the novel's relevance in terms of practical frameworks, the novel is not limited to literary-critical perspectives. This act of narrative testimony brings to mind the politics of historical justice and the post colonial ghosts of reconciliation and postwar in Africa. The novel has served as a public memory-work practice, and has been widely employed in educational settings in Nigeria and on the African continent, both to augment and defy official commemorative culture. It has also helped to trigger a wider cultural shift that has led to public discussion, the making of documentary films and the resurgence of scholarly interest in the Nigeria-Biafra War, the subject of which was largely absent from the national curriculum.

5. Conclusion

This paper has proposed that Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* is a complex and politically-charged investigation into the politics of collective memory in postcolonial Nigeria. The paper shows how the novel, through close textual analysis and supported by theoretical perspectives from memory studies, postcolonial theory and trauma theory has deconstructed the fiction of Nigerian national unity by highlighting the ethnic and colonial tension that gave birth to the Biafra War constructed a form of counter-memory that is an opposition to the institutional amnesia imposed by postcolonial state policy; and brought to the fore the voices of women, subaltern subjects and the marginalized communities who have been systematically silenced in the official memory of the Biafra War.

The novel is not only a literary success but it is also an ethical and political statement. Adichie is to be commended for her efforts in naming the dead, mourning the disappeared, and listening to the silenced as she engages in a larger enterprise of postcolonial memory- work that is a fundamental part of any constructive attempt at historical justice and national reconciliation. This sub-subaltern character, Ugwu represents the ambition as part of a "the book within the book" metalepsis that is particularly potent: it is a reminder that the politics of historical narration is never innocent or inconsequential whose voice tells what, and whose are ignored.

To investigate the novel's reception history in Nigeria and globally is a worthwhile field of research, with a need to consider how the memory-work of the novel has been differently activated by various reading communities across the generational, ethnic and national boundaries. But the comparative analysis with other literary portrayals of the Biafra War such as those by Chinua Achebe Cyprian Ekwensi and Flora Nwapa would also be enriching to the understanding of the literary politics of this contested historical memory. In addition to that the Biafra War has its own growing collections of digital memory projects and oral history archives, providing other contexts for the intervention of the narrative in Adichie's work and this could be a fruitful intersection of literary criticism and new Digital Memory Studies.

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