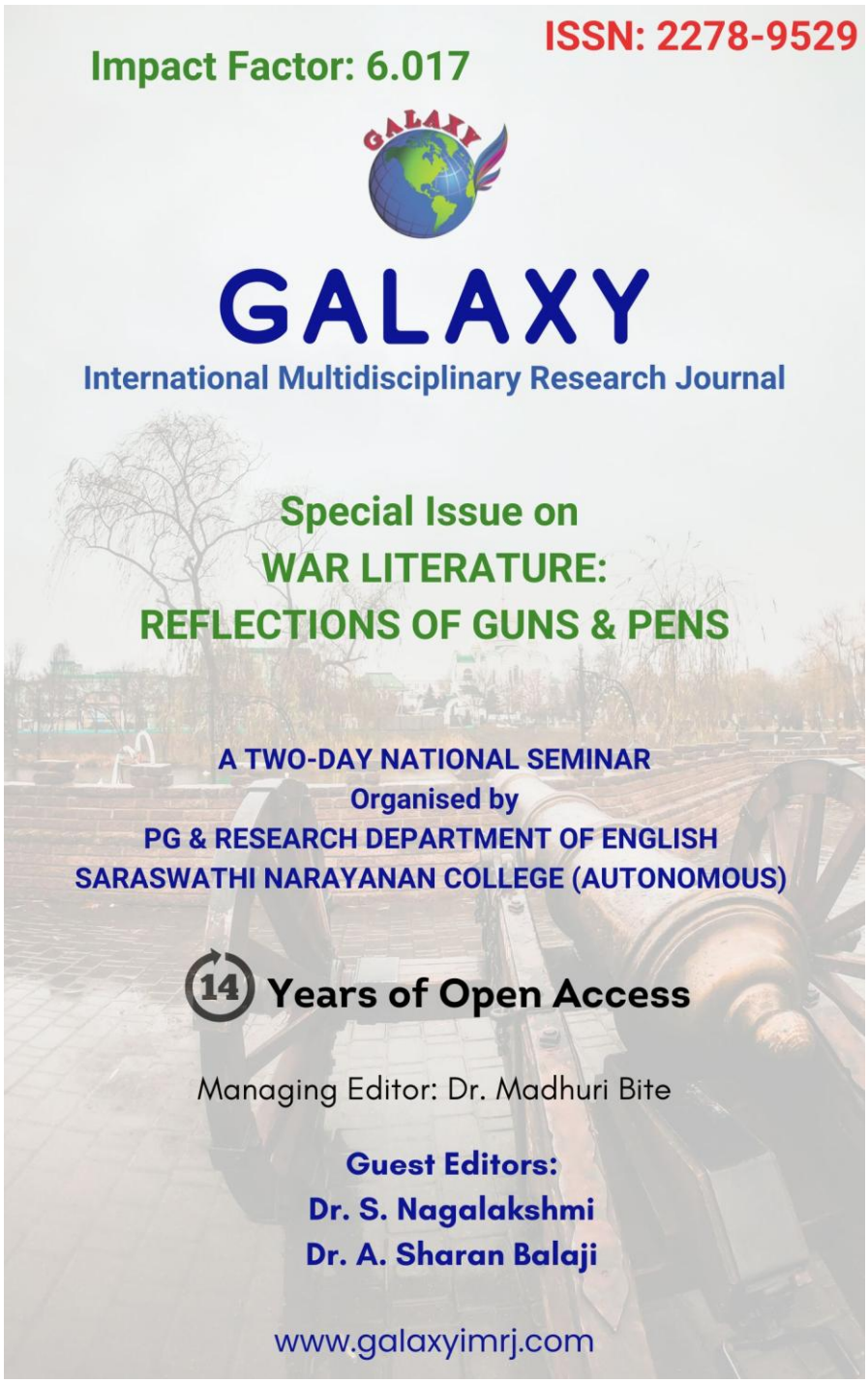


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The Effects of War on African Literature: A Study of *Half of a Yellow Sun* by Chimanda Ngozi Adichi

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Abstract:

Nigeria, an African country with a lot of different ethnic groups and cultural backgrounds, got its freedom from Britain in 1960. Colonial governments didn't recognise the different ethnic groups in Nigeria, which led to political and regional issues that eventually led to the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970). In her 2006 book Half of a Yellow Sun, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie shows how the war in Nigeria affected the people who lived there, as well as their racial ties and sense of who they are as a country. The study looks at Adichie's stories about how the war changed African literature by focussing on three main themes: racial rivalries, colonial inheritance, cultural differences, and the fight for freedom. This study looks at how war changes people's personal and collective lives by looking at four key characters: twins from a business family, an academic, a British national in a relationship with a domestic worker, and a British national in a relationship with a domestic worker. The study looks at how Adichie contributes to attempts to decolonise the past. This study shows that Half of a Yellow Sun is both an unpredictable viewer of colonial histories and a piece of writing that disagrees with those histories.

Keywords: Nigerian Civil War, Biafran War, Colonial legacies, Ethnic conflict, Postcolonial studies, Independence.

Half of a Yellow Sun Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie changes home-centered literary categories by using war realities. She also adds feminist views to war fiction, carrying on the

work of Nigerian literary giants Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta (225). In her part called "What is the Country? Reimagining National Space in Women's Writing on the Biafran War," Jane Bryce looks at how Half of a Yellow Sun changed over time. In "What is the Country? Reimagining National Space in Women's Writing on the Biafran War," Bryce looks at Half of a Yellow Sun in the setting of other works by women writers about the Biafran War. Bryce says that the book challenges male dominance and the official version of history that supports nationalist rhetoric (450).

The author of *Half of a Yellow Sun* shows how war makes a lot of people unhappy, especially when they talk about the three-year Biafran War. The book gives a true picture of wartime losses, including deaths, hunger, and the terrible pain that women, children, and the elderly go through. The story's history background starts in 1967, when Chukwuemeka Ojukwu made the eastern parts of Nigeria into the independent country of Biafra. Before the war started, the Nigerian government was very against the rising sun sign that was used to declare Biafra.

From the very beginning of Half of a Yellow Sun, the author presents us to Odenigbo, a university professor who is strongly against British rule in Nigeria. The story is told from Ugwu's point of view, along with those of two main characters: Ugwu, a village boy who works as Odenigbo's houseboy just before the fighting starts, and Olanna Odenigbo, his high-class girlfriend, who has emotional problems and is dating Richard, an Englishman who is studying Igbo-Ukwu art mystique and is hopelessly in love with Kainene. During the story, Ugwu grows from a country boy who doesn't know much about writing to a skilled author.

Likewise, Olanna and Kainene mature from political fringes to contributing agents, both representing opposite sides of the effects of the war—one in individual suffering and the other in courage and selflessness. Their sibling relationship and that of Olanna with Odenigbo

provide the emotional fulcrum for the novel. Although Ugwu's narrative function is largely observational, his later direct participation in the war and development as a writer reinforce the novel's larger issues of historical record and individual control. Richard, by contrast, is an outsider whose musings on art and love offer a reflective frame by which the war is viewed.

Through *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Adichie not only recounts historical proceedings but also presents a nuanced portrayal of African society, emphasizing its values, culture, and resilience. in spite of being born years after the Biafran War, Adichie authentically captures its impact on Nigerian society. In an interview, she reflects on her motivation for writing the novel:

> 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. (P.S. Section, HYS 2)

The urge to explore Nigeria's political instability, which culminated in the civil war, has been a central theme for many Nigerian novelists. Although Nigeria gained independence in 1960, the following years were marked by disillusionment, as corruption and ethnic divisions deepened under the leadership of the country's early legislators. In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, an unnamed narrator struggles with telling the story of Biafra, only for readers to later understand that the author of *The World Was Silent When We Died*—a book within the novel—is none other than Ugwu, the once illiterate houseboy from the opening pages. Adichie admits that Ugwu was the easiest character for her to write, stating:

> 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)

Each of this novel's central characters—Ugwu, Odenigbo, Olanna, Kainene, and Richard—undergo profound changes as the story unfolds. Ugwu, in particular, transitions beginning an uneducated, awkward boy to a perceptive and resourceful writer, shaped by his master Odenigbo's emphasis on education. Odenigbo underscores the importance of knowledge in resisting oppression, declaring: "Education is a priority! How can we resist exploitation if we don't have the tool to understand exploitation?" (HYS 11)

Through reading and formal schooling, Ugwu becomes an integral part of Odenigbo's household and later, a chronicler of war. His writings, while not necessarily presenting new historical facts, offer a deeply personal interpretation of the past and how it should be remembered. In this way, Ugwu's narrative mirrors Adichie's technique to the fiction—blending the personal and the political. This is evident in his inclusion of "Olanna's anecdote about the story of [the] woman with the calabash" (HYS 82), a moment that reflects the novel's commitment to intertwining individual experiences with broader historical events.

Adichie's novel serves as a critical framework for analyzing and interpreting the political ideologies of its characters, reinforcing their perspectives on historical events. The narrative delves into key moments in Nigeria's past, including the military groups of 1966, the widespread slaughter of Igbo people, and the eventual secession of the Igbo-oppressed Eastern Region, which led to the Nigerian Civil War. Interwoven with these events, Adichie

weaves in a metatext that gives historical background, for example, the 1914 union of Northern and Southern Nigeria and how it contributed to ethnic divisions. This metatext is an alternative to flashback, giving historical depth without breaking the flow of the novel. Similar to the main story, it uses a realist approach, mixing historical truth with fiction, as evident in the repetition of the motif of the head in the calabash, a haunting vision that highlights the violence of war.

The novel traces the experiences of its main characters: Ugwu, Olanna, Odenigbo, and their daughter Baby, who live in Nsukka, an area that becomes a center of the civil war. Through their experiences, Adichie examines the political turmoil sparked by Biafra's secession and explores the economic, cultural, literary, and spiritual tensions that shaped the conflict. By portraying the war's emotional and psychological toll, she presents a multifaceted depiction of this historical struggle.

One of the most harrowing moments in the fiction occurs when Olanna visits her uncle's home in Kano, only to onlooker the massacre of her family. The trauma of the scene leaves her in a state of shock, as she initially feels a "watery queasiness" before emotional numbness sets in (HYS 147). It is only upon her return to Nsukka that the full horror of the event overwhelms her, causing physical paralysis and a complete emotional breakdown: "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). Olanna's trauma manifests both physically and mentally, leaving her bedridden for weeks and plagued by horror assaults, which she refers to while the "Dark Swoops": "A thick blanket descended from above and pressed itself over her face, firmly, while she struggled to breathe" (HYS 156).

Although she recounts the events to Odenigbo, speaking gradually becomes laborious, as if the weight of her experience is too much to bear. However, articulating her pain offers a

degree of liberation, as she describes the horrific sight of "the vaguely familiar clothes on the headless bodies in the yard, the still-twitchy fingers on Uncle Mbaezi's hand" (HYS 156). Adichie underscores the importance of bearing witness and narration as tools for processing trauma. Yet, Olanna remains unable to fully integrate her painful memories into the present, struggling to articulate the unspeakable even when her parents and sister visit: "When her parents and Kainene visited, she did not say much; it was Odenigbo who told them what she had seen" (HYS 157).

Her experiences exemplify the deep psychological scars left by war and collective violence. As the conflict escalates, Nigeria declares war on Biafra, seeking to reclaim the seceded territory. With military support from Britain and Russia, the Nigerian forces gain the upper hand against the initially hopeful Biafrans. The fall of Nsukka forces Olanna, Odenigbo, Ugwu, and Baby to flee to Abba and later to the refugee town of Umuahia. As the war drags on, their circumstances worsen, marked by critical food shortages, relentless air raids, and an ambience of fear and paranoia. Olanna, in particular, endures immense hardship in the refugee camp, symbolizing the struggles faced by countless civilians during the war.

Adichie also presents the perspective of Richard Churchill, an Englishman who, despite being a product of the colonizing power, becomes deeply attached to Biafra through his love for Kainene. Unlike the other European characters, Richard is neither detached nor condescending but is instead emotionally vulnerable and invested in the Biafran cause. His character serves as a counterpoint to the dominant colonial narrative. A particularly distressing moment occurs when he notices the mass murder of Igbo people at Kano airport. Moments before the attack, he speaks briefly with a customs officer named Nnaemeka, who is later executed alongside a dozen others simply for being Igbo. The horror of the event overwhelms Richard, leaving him physically ill: "He almost missed his flight because, as the

other passengers walked shakily to the plane, he stood aside, vomiting" (HYS 153). Through Richard's perspective, Adichie offers an external lens on the conflict, challenging simplistic narratives about the war and colonial influence. His character underscores the complexities of identity, allegiance, and moral responsibility in times of war.

By intertwining historical events with deeply personal narratives, *Half of a Yellow Sun* exemplifies the role of African literature in preserving memory as well as interrogating the lasting effects of war. Adichie's novel not only documents a critical chapter in Nigerian history but also highlights the enduring psychological and social consequences of conflict, making it a profound contribution to war literature in the African literary tradition.

Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* illuminates the great suffering that the Biafran people went through during the Nigerian Civil War. The fiction captures the destructive effect of the war across the lives of its characters, depicting themes of loss, survival, and resilience. Ugwu, who is a houseboy with aspirations for education, has his life turned around when he is forcibly drafted into the Biafran army against his will. His war experiences are characterized by violence and tragedy, such as his involvement in the brutal gang rape of a bar girl. Blinded and injured in combat, he is assumed dead until he is eventually discovered in a hospital and returned home. In the meantime, the capture of Umuahia compels Olanna's family to flee to take shelter with Kainene and Richard, with Kainene operating a refugee camp. As famine becomes more acute, Kainene courageously ventures across enemy lines in quest of food but never returns, despite the war has ended.

The impact of the war between Nigeria and Biafra is not limited to strategic and economic losses, but its greatest effect is on the marginalized—women, children, and the elderly. Hunger and disease became as deadly as the conflict itself, exacerbating the already staggering death toll. Despite the scale of suffering, relief efforts were severely hindered by

political interference, with both warring factions and international humanitarian organizations failing to provide adequate support. This neglect caused in prevalent undernourishment, deprivation, and human rights violation ns, particularly among the most vulnerable. The war left a lasting scar on Nigeria and set a troubling precedent in African history. As Johnson notes, the conflict be "a horrific and traumatic experience whose shock waves [were] felt throughout the Nigerian federation" (Johnson 149).

The narrative vividly depicts the country unravelling, with images of people collapsing from hunger, families torn apart, and makeshift hospitals and feeding centers struggling to provide relief. Everyday life is completely upended—fuel is rationed, relief supplies are airlifted into Biafra under cover of darkness, and desperate civilians undertake perilous journeys for food. Adichie meticulously captures the details of survival, particularly the crucial role of food, as starvation becomes both a weapon of war and a symbol of suffering. The desperation of the Biafrans is encapsulated in the passage from *The Book* by Ugwu:

> 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).

Within the refugee camps, children succumb to kwashiorkor, a severe protein shortage disease that manifests in swollen bellies, pale skin, and reddish hair. Yet, amidst the suffering, life continues—people fall in love, get married, and strive to maintain some sense of normalcy. Adichie emphasizes the resilience of the human spirit, showing how individuals

adapt even in the face of unimaginable adversity. Ironically, while the war becomes a important moment in political history, its larger ideological battles fade into the background for those directly affected. For characters like Odenigbo, Olanna, and Ugwu, the war is reduced to its most immediate and personal struggles—hunger, fear, and the desperate search for lost loved ones. For Olanna, the war's end means one thing: the chance to find her missing twin sister, Kainene, who never returned from her journey behind enemy lines.

With Biafra's eventual surrender, Nigeria is reunified, but the scars of war remain. Richard and Olanna set out in a frantic search for Kainene, but it is to no avail. Olanna's family goes back to Nsukka, only to discover that their house has been ransacked and their economic stability wiped out. In spite of the destruction, Olanna holds on to memories of her life with Kainene, and the slim hope that she may return someday. The war changes every one of the novel's characters in a fundamental way, challenging them to develop methods of living with the trauma and loss that they have suffered.

War in *Half of a Yellow Sun* is a lens used to examine larger themes of human existence. The characters walk through the difficult challenges, such as trauma, hunger, professional ambitions, and domestic ties, all of which are influenced by the harsh realities of war. In contrast to traditional historical accounts limited by the strictures of factual accuracy, Adichie's novel provides a more flexible and engaging narrative, capturing the emotional richness and personal experience of those touched by the Nigerian Civil War. A richer than mere compelling tale, Half of a Yellow Sun is a deep exploration of the human condition, illuminating the long-term effects of war on individuals and society.

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