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Half of a Yellow Sun: A Study of Cultural Memory, War Trauma, and Postcolonial Identity

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Abstract

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) is one of the most powerful contemporary African novels that reconstructs the Nigerian-Biafran War (1967-70) through the lens of cultural memory, trauma, and postcolonial identity. This article examines how Adichie reimagines national history through personal narratives and how she integrates political conflict with intimate human experience. Using a cultural memory framework, the analysis shows how the novel functions as an archive of suppressed histories and fragmented memories of war. It explores major themes such as nationalist ideology, ethnic tensions, gendered experiences of violence, the psychological consequences of war, and the politics of storytelling.

The paper argues that *Half of a Yellow Sun* not only rehabilitates forgotten narratives but also interrogates the processes through which nations remember and forget. Through its polyphonic narrative structure, shifting perspectives, and emotional realism, the text foregrounds the intersection of private memory and collective trauma, making the novel a significant contribution to global postcolonial literature.

Keywords: Cultural Memory, Biafran War, Trauma, Postcolonial Identity, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Nigerian Literature, Nationalism, Violence, Memory Studies

Introduction

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* stands as a monumental work of contemporary African literature, offering a deeply intimate yet politically expansive portrayal of the Nigerian-Biafran War. Published in 2006, the novel blends fictional storytelling with historical reconstruction, functioning both as a literary narrative and a cultural archive. At its core, the novel challenges the silence surrounding the war—a historical event often marginalized in official Nigerian historiography. The narrative revives erased memories of suffering, survival,

resistance, and identity, and it uses literature as a medium to restore agency to those whose voices have been long forgotten.

Through multiple perspectives primarily those of Ugwu, Olanna, and Richard-Adichie portrays how ordinary individuals are shaped by and respond to national crisis. The novel engages with critical themes such as nationalism, the formation of Biafra, ethnic tension between the Igbo and Hausa communities, gendered violence, and the psychological aftermath of war. By anchoring these themes within personal stories, Adichie demonstrates that cultural memory is preserved most effectively through lived experience rather than official political narratives.

This article analyzes *Half of a Yellow Sun* through the lens of cultural memory and trauma studies while also drawing on insights from postcolonial and feminist theory. It argues that Adichie's novel is a seminal work that bridges the gap between personal recollection and collective memory, making the text an important site for understanding war, identity, and the politics of remembrance.

Cultural Memory and the Reconstruction of History

Cultural memory theorists such as Jan Assmann argue that memory is transmitted not only through personal experiences but through cultural forms such as literature, ritual, and symbol. *Half of a Yellow Sun* serves exactly this function-it becomes a repository of memories that were suppressed in Nigeria's postwar narrative. Adichie herself has stated that she wrote the novel because the stories of Biafra remained "absent and incomplete" in Nigeria's public history.

The title-a reference to the Biafran flag-reinforces the novel's role as a cultural memory text. The half of a yellow sun symbolizes both hope and fragmentation, evoking the incomplete realization of the Biafran dream and the incomplete process of collective remembering after the war.

Throughout the novel, Adichie integrates oral storytelling, family history, photographs, letters, and Richard's unfinished book *The World Was Silent When We Died* to show how memory is stored, transmitted, and sometimes lost. This meta-narrative structure strengthens the novel's function as a literary archive.

Polyphonic Narrative Structure

One of the most striking features of the novel is its polyphonic structure. By presenting the narrative through three primary voices-Ugwu (the houseboy), Olanna (the educated elite), and

Richard (the British expatriate)-Adichie captures diverse social positions and perspectives. This multiplicity allows readers to experience the war through varying emotional, class-based, and cultural experiences.

- **Ugwu’s perspective** foregrounds the war through the eyes of a child and later a young soldier, positioning him as a carrier of collective trauma.
- **Olanna’s perspective** represents the gendered experience of war-displacement, sexual violence, and the burden of emotional labour.
- **Richard’s narrative** exposes the complications of identity, cultural appropriation, and the gaze of the outsider.

The nonlinear timeline further reinforces the fragmentation typical of trauma narratives. The jumps between early sixties and late sixties mimic the unreliability and irregularity of memory itself. This technique enables Adichie to highlight how traumatic histories do not unfold smoothly but return in fragments.

Nationalism and the Birth of Biafra

Adichie portrays the rise of Biafran nationalism through characters such as Odenigbo, the “revolutionary,” whose home becomes a meeting ground for intellectual debate. The novel provides insights into:

- the colonial roots of ethnic tension
- the political failures of post-independence Nigeria
- the massacre of Igbo civilians in Northern Nigeria
- the psychological need for a new identity through Biafra

For many characters, Biafra represents hope—a rebirth of dignity and self-determination. For instance, when Olanna witnesses the massacre at Kano, the political suddenly becomes deeply personal, and the call for Biafra transforms into a survival instinct rather than an abstract ideology.

Yet, the novel does not romanticize nationalism. Adichie exposes its contradictions, such as class divisions, corruption, and propaganda within Biafra itself. Ugwu’s conscription into the army and the violence he witnesses reveal the darker side of nationalist warfare.

Trauma and the Psychology of War

Trauma is a central theme throughout the novel. Each character experiences a different form of psychological rupture:

1. Ugwu's Trauma

Ugwu's transformation from a naïve boy into a soldier who participates in violence—including the rape of a bar girl—reveals the moral fragmentation created by war. Adichie uses Ugwu to demonstrate how trauma induces both victimhood and perpetration.

2. Olanna's Trauma

Olanna suffers displacement, loss of stability, and the emotional burden of caring for others. Her traumatic memory of “the legs in the bowl”—the severed limbs of a child carried by a refugee—becomes a recurring symbol of Nigerian brutality. Olanna's trauma is also gendered; she bears the emotional and physical consequences of war in ways the male characters do not fully comprehend.

3. Richard's Trauma

Although an outsider, Richard's trauma is tied to his struggles with belonging. His inability to fully own the story of Biafra reflects a postcolonial tension—can a foreigner ever claim the authority to narrate another culture's pain? Adichie employs flashbacks, silence, repetition, and fragmented scenes to illustrate the persistent and haunting nature of trauma memory.

Gendered Experiences of War

While the novel deals with political and military conflict, Adichie foregrounds women's experiences, which are often omitted from official histories. Women in *Half of a Yellow Sun* face:

- displacement and starvation
- loss of children
- sexual violence
- emotional labour of holding families together

Olanna, Kainene, Mama, Amala, and other women represent different social and class experiences of gendered oppression. Kainene's disappearance symbolizes the thousands of missing women of war whose stories were never documented.

The novel also critiques patriarchal authority. Even progressive men like Odenigbo fail to recognize the emotional labour performed by women. Adichie challenges male-dominated narratives of nationalism by showing that the burden of war falls disproportionately on women's bodies and minds.

The Politics of Storytelling

One of the novel's meta-narrative elements is the unfinished book written by Richard, titled *The World Was Silent When We Died*. The name itself critiques global silence during the Biafran War. However, the significant revelation comes at the end-Ugwu, not Richard, is the actual author of the book. This shift is symbolic:

- It returns narrative agency to an African voice.
- It rejects colonial mediation of African history.
- It affirms that those who lived the history should write it.

Ugwu's act of writing becomes an act of healing. It is also a political act—an assertion that cultural memory must be shaped by those who bear the scars.

Violence, Starvation, and Humanitarian Crisis

Adichie vividly depicts starvation, disease, and displacement. The humanitarian crisis in Biafra is shown through:

- kwashiorkor-ridden children
- lack of medicine
- air raids
- refugees flooding the countryside

Her descriptions are raw yet empathetic, capturing both physical suffering and emotional resilience. These scenes revive historical memory of the Biafran famine, which international photography and media once documented but which many modern readers have forgotten.

Postcolonial Identity and the Question of Belonging

Adichie critiques the lingering impact of colonialism, which contributed to ethnic division, political instability, and identity crises. British political decisions created artificial borders and deepened ethnic mistrust. Richard's character represents the postcolonial outsider who desires belonging but never truly attains it.

For the Igbo characters, Biafra becomes a symbolic rejection of colonial legacy. Yet, the failure of Biafra raises questions about whether postcolonial nationhood can ever fully escape its colonial roots.

The Ending: Loss, Memory, and Unfinished Healing

The novel ends with the disappearance of Kainene—a haunting symbol of unresolved trauma. Her absence stands for the thousands of people who vanished during the war and whose families received no closure. The ending is not a traditional resolution but a reminder that:

- trauma continues across generations
- cultural memory is ongoing
- healing is incomplete
- some losses cannot be overwritten

Ugwu's decision to write his book suggests that storytelling becomes a form of survival. Literature becomes a site of memory work, regenerative and healing yet truthful about pain.

Conclusion

Half of a Yellow Sun is a powerful literary contribution that reclaims suppressed cultural memory and foregrounds the human consequences of war. Through multi-layered narratives, Adichie reconstructs a historical tragedy with emotional depth, political insight, and ethical sensitivity. The novel not only revives the forgotten stories of Biafra but also interrogates the broader processes of remembering and forgetting in postcolonial societies.

Adichie's narrative demonstrates that national histories are incomplete without the voices of ordinary individuals—women, children, servants, and survivors. The text, therefore, becomes a communal archive that preserves trauma while offering pathways toward healing and understanding. In doing so, *Half of a Yellow Sun* solidifies its place as an essential work of global literature and a profound commentary on the politics of memory.

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