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### Transcending Boundaries and Historical Trauma in Chimamanda

#### Ngozi Adichie's *half of a Yellow Sun*

#### Abstract

The novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* by the African author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is generally regarded as a breakthrough novel that deals with the psychic experiences of Nigerian people during the postcolonial and the civil war period. As the novel revolves around a major historical event, the Biafran civil war, the analysis of the historical turmoil, and the associated issues regarding the novel are substantial. According to a general definition of historical trauma, it mainly deals with cumulative traumatic experiences of individuals or an entire generation who have gone through any traumatic event or series of events. The article analyses various traumatic instances in the war narrative and how various interpretations can be drawn out from the study.

KEY WORDS: Historical Trauma, war narrative, postcolonial Othering, Healing.

Historical Trauma Theory contributes to poststructuralist and deconstructionist notions in showing up the inefficiency or rather the inability of language as a construct in articulating the experiences of the people who have gone through an emotional and psychological wounding. Dominick LaCapra's *representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, and Trauma* represents two basic things. One is in relation to Holocaust representation and the other one is in connection with historical trauma and its transmission. According to the theory of Dominik LaCapra during the first stage of historical trauma,

there is a tendency for repression but later it paves the way for uncontrollable repetitions. This can be witnessed in relation to the war survivors who might not be affected during the course of the events but later. Dominik LaCapra's theory of repression and transmission of trauma works out well in the case of transgenerational trauma where the second and third generations of trauma survivors get affected through the legacy they get during the course of their upbringing. More than that, the direct people who got the experiences themselves might go through the events with a detached mindset due to their inability to do anything but at a later stage clear indications of changes are expressed in their lives when they get compulsive repetitions of trauma.

Another specific area LaCapra has dealt with his Trauma Studies is the element of transference. The inability to cope with one's own rambling return of traumatic events portrays a person's failure in accepting the emotional and psychological wound that had occurred during an event or a series of events. In psychoanalytic terminology, the concept of transference is related to a return of the repressed emotions and pain. It is also a deliberated and conscious calling for the repressed that needs to be expressed at one point or the other. It gives an opportunity for rendering and remembering a past horrible or uneasy thing in the new setting so that an individual can assess and evaluate that haunting thing in terms of the present. Thus it provides an additional opportunity for the individual to go through the traumatic symptoms. Thus the latent trauma expresses itself and trauma is never a thing that can be differentiated from its expressions. Both the events as well as the representation are two aspects of trauma itself. The latency as well as the repression associated with trauma, is something that cannot be neglected according to the theories of Dominik LaCapra.

The problem of articulation of trauma victims is evident in the introduction of the work by Cathy Caruth named *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Cathy Caruth argues that trauma at the first stage is definitely incomprehensible and it becomes a narrative only after a period of latency. The relation between pain and language is problematic when historical trauma is under

consideration. The whole concept regarding historical narratives by Cathy Caruth stands on the point that historical narratives themselves are the products of intersecting traumatic compulsive repetitions. The notion of language as a medium that expresses emotions and feelings finds a barrier when it comes to the narrative side of trauma.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's fictional work *half of a Yellow Sun* is based on Biafran war and political turmoil of Nigeria influenced by the postcolonial social conditions. As a third generation African author who depicts the life of Africa, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has always focused on the ongoing effects that are still prevalent in African land due to colonization. *Half of a Yellow Sun* is Adichie's second novel and was published in 2006, set before and during the time of Nigerian-Biafran war. The novel spans to and fro in two different time periods.

The storyline of *Half of a Yellow Sun* draws upon the situation of a newly formed independent nation right after a traumatic colonial period and later how it goes on to another war atmosphere, and that too internal. With the arrival of Ugwu from an Igbo bush village, as a houseboy for Odenigbo, a radical and revolutionary, the present situation is unfolded for the readers. Odenigbo, a university professor in Nsukka, seems to be an intellectual who talks in length about the aftermath of colonization and the lack of feasibility in the formation of Nigeria as a whole neglecting the independent existence of ethnic groups gives new ideas to Ugwu and he becomes the greatest influence of Ugwu's life. The discussions he holds with other university people form the main agenda of every evening. Meanwhile, Odenigbo brings his girlfriend Olanna to his house and the situation goes better and well until an unrest caused by Odenigbo's mother due to her hatred for Olanna. Even then things go pretty much normal in an overall sense.

A parallel plot runs following the love story of Richard Churchill, a British writer deeply interested in African culture and customs happened to be in love with Kainene, Olanna's twin sister,

after breaking up with his ex-girlfriend, Susan. Things drastically change when the narrative moves forward to late 1960s. The situation is that of social and political unrest in the land of Nigeria, when the Igbo coup followed by Hausa counter-coup happens. Government is overthrown and the characters are all in a plight for their lives. Horrific instances of war are experienced by all the characters at one level or the other and the crisis goes on when all of them feel to be alone in spite of whoever they stand by. A new found hope occurs when Colonel Ojukwu, announces the secession of Biafra from Nigeria.

Though the initial hope seems to be quite comforting, Nigeria with the help of US and UK declares war on Biafra and the comfortable lives again change as Olanna, Odenigbo, Ugwu, and Baby move to the cities of Abba and Umuahaia. Olanna and Odenigbo get married as a sense of holding on and belonging during the time of war and even that does not give a relief as the marriage itself happens in the midst of an air raid. The narrative again moves back to the early sixties and it depicts the complexities of the intertwined relationship between the main characters. In the absence of Olanna, Odenigbo sleeps with Amala and in that frustration Olanna seduces Richard. Even though both agree to keep this as a secret, Odenigbo comes to know about this through Olanna and later Kainene also realizes the matter. The rift between the sisters widens more and though Kainene does not leave Richard she burns his manuscript.

When the narrative again moves forward to the late sixties, the tremendous effects of the Biafran civil war are clearly visible in all its peak form of atrocities. Odenigbo's mother is killed brutally and the characters are seen struggling to be safe and the character changes are remarkable. Ugwu is taken into the army by force and a brutal thing happened during his service changes his entire perceptions about his own self. Kainene and Olanna unite and they take care of the refugee camp. Deprivation due to starvation and diseases become very common and the people desperately wait for the war to end. One day in order to get some additional stock Kainene goes beyond the enemy line and disappears. Though they search for them, they do not get any information regarding her. Finally, Biafra

surrenders to Nigeria and the war is finally over. Though the tough time is over and the relationships survive over the test of time, nothing remains as earlier times and humanity witnesses another instance where nothing can be done except to accept the changes and move on tolerating the awaiting trials and tribulations. As the entire novel revolves around one big historical event, the Biafran civil war, the novel deals with and depicts the way war changes the life of an entire generation. A whole generation's psychological wounding is portrayed through some main characters and they become the yardstick of measurement of assessing the intensity of trauma suffered by the Igbo community, and also by other parts of Nigeria.

The traumatic instances from the novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* are intertwined throughout the plot. The novel is considered belonging to the genre of trauma fiction not only in relation to its postcolonial traumatic elements but also in relation to its war instances. The best representations of trauma symptoms are explicated through her characters and at a thematic level in the novel. The crucial thing in her narrative form is that the flashback and flash forward methodology is directly linked to the traumatic experiences, the characters have experienced. In a way, her narrative technique of giving flashback is a form of repetition of the experience of traumatic events. It is a repetition for the readers about what the characters have experienced and further, there are flashbacks of the characters themselves. It is the repetition of remembrance about a particular incident or series of events. This can be stated in the cases of Olanna and Ugwu. The major trauma that they experience is mainly due to continuous flashbacks they take to the past.

Olanna, the daughter of Chief Obinze, who is very influential and rich in the newly formed Nigeria, is a classic example of modern day woman. The seemingly difficult life of Olanna begins only after moving in with Odenigbo. Odenigbo's betrayal by sleeping with Amala, Olanna's revenge by sleeping with her own sister's lover Richard and her increased drift from Kainene are all her personal tragedies. They do not stand as anything that caters to her later traumatic experiences.

Olanna goes to the northern part, Kano after the so-called Igbo coup that has created unrest and threw off the existing Nigerian government. She has gone to visit her relative, Arize who is fully pregnant and Olanna has stayed in close touch with her and knows how eagerly she is waiting for her baby. When she has come to see her aunt's family after the mob has turned violent and started killing the Igbo people, she has found her uncle and aunt murdered and Arize missing, probably dead. The narration at this point startles the readers with its detailed description of the scene. "She stopped when she saw the bodies. Uncle Mbaezi lay face down in an ungainly twist, legs splayed. Something creamy-white oozed through the large gash on the back of his head. Aunty Ifeka lay on the veranda. The cuts on her naked body were smaller, dotting her arms and legs slightly parted red lips" (HYS 147).

When all these incidents happen, the reaction of Olanna is something that demands attention and Cathy Caruth's theory of "Inherent latency" can be applied in this situation. "The experience of trauma, the fact of latency, would thus seem to consider, not in the forgetting of a reality that can hence never be fully known, but in an inherent latency within the experience itself" (Caruth 8). The term inherent latency indicates the time during which the symptoms of trauma are not visible. Olanna does not realize the death of Arize too. What she has in her mind is that Arize was pregnant and she might need help. "But she could not leave without Arize. Arize was due any time. Arize needed to be close to a doctor" (147). At that point due to this latency of emotions, she has not come into terms with Arize's death or anyone else's death. This kind of a situation is further explained by Cathy Caruth in her introduction to *Trauma: Explorations in memory*.

[T]here is a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviours stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event. (4)

Till the moment Olanna has reached home, the traumatic symptoms are delayed. And furthermore, her thoughts even while having an intimate moment with her lover goes on to the event she has witnessed though there are seemingly no connection and similarities. This explains Caruth's description of Post-traumatic stress disorder as thoughts or behaviours stemming from the event along with a feeling of numbness. In this case, the numbness has started during that event and after an inherent latency period, it gets expressed outside.

It seems that in the narration of Adichie, the concepts of trauma such as numbness and inherent latency are so well expressed both at a character level and at a deep thematic level. In association with the above-mentioned witness of murder scene of her aunt and uncle, Olanna has experienced strange kind of flashbacks and panic attacks. Though she becomes very numb and cannot walk for a particular period of time, she has become normal after a while. And it is during this time the secession happens and in that moment of victory and happiness, Olanna feels to be content in her own and existence. When Odenigbo raises his arms to address the audience, the seemingly perfect and healthy Olanna cannot help but think about her aunt and the murder scene she has witnessed. Though she does not rewind it or remember it, the past seems not ready to leave the present and she tries to shake away the thoughts that come to her mind by physically shaking her head. The life of Olanna is filled with these intrusions and visions from the past.

One of the major scenes that have created a trauma for Olanna is on her way back to Nsukka from Kano. The train which has carried Igbo people, who have survived the Housa outrage, has been very crowded and the entire train journey is one of the most haunting images of the civil war. In that train, Olanna has been seated next to another woman who has a calabash with her. The woman has been silent throughout the journey and finally when she opens her mouth and the calabash, it becomes the most horrible scene. She asks everyone to take a look and opens the calabash.

Olanna looked into the bowl. She saw the little girl's head with the ashy-grey skin and the pleated hair and rolled-back eyes and open mouth. She stared at it for a while before she looked away. Somebody screamed. The woman closed the calabash. 'Do you know', she said, 'it took me so long to plait this hair? She had such thick hair'. (149)

After all these incidents Olanna somehow has reached Odenigbo's house surviving a long tiring train journey under the above-mentioned circumstances and another three hours of journey in an overcrowded bus and when finally she has reached, she gets collapsed at the front door. Both her legs and urinary bladder have failed and she has entirely lost all her strength and fell. This again shows that delay in action. When the woman has opened the calabash in her utmost agony, Olanna has fixed her eyes at the little girl's head for a while, which is quite not normal. Before trauma sets in, Olanna has reached home and all her weakness and the inability to walk for long weeks are the effects of trauma symptoms. However, the latency period here is worth mentioning. Olanna has begun to show the symptoms right when she has started to stare at the dead girl's head in the train and the latency period has ended exactly when she has reached the house and succumbed to the aftereffects and other consequences of trauma.

In the novel, it is mentioned that following the temporary paralysis of Olanna she had experienced a strange incident of dark swoops, which can be somewhat related with panic attacks mostly faced by trauma survivors or affected people. The dark swoop is described in the novel as "A thick blanket descended from above and pressed itself over her face, firmly, while she struggled to breathe" (156). This has given rise to a series of hallucinations for Olanna. As a matter of fact, she cannot give expression to what she has felt during these panic attacks. Though she has tried to describe them, she is never successful in articulating what she has experienced properly. She is able to say the horrible things she has witnessed to Odenigbo but not her personal agony. The strange thing is that she

has remembered all the details of the corpses and she has told him but not the panic attacks she has experienced.

Another major trauma symptom Olanna has shown are the hallucinations as a continuation of the panic attacks or dark swoops. "...then when let it go, freeing her to take in gulp after gulp of air, she saw burning owls at the window grinning and beckoning to her with charred feathers" (156). One of the major characters in the novel who has shown most of the typical traumatic symptoms is definitely Olanna. Though most of the symptoms are delayed that can be also stated as one such characteristic features of post-traumatic stress disorder when Caruth's theory of inherent latency is stated. Here Olanna has missed an empathetic listener for most of the time.

But Ugwu asks her the details about the incident that she has witnessed on the train when she has once mentioned that she keeps on thinking about the hair on the child's head. And then Ugwu asks very casually how it has been plaited. It is at this point that Olanna herself has realized how powerful and detailed memory she is in possession of the scene she has witnessed. "Then she described the head itself, the open eyes, and the greying skin (410). In the narration it tells that seeing the earnestness of Ugwu and the way he has noted all of these in his notes, Olanna has suddenly felt like revealing all of the details and she has felt that her story is important. The matter that is important is the time at which she has revealed it freely to one person. Till then she is not able to articulate it fully to everyone. "Speaking was a labour. When her parents and Kainene visited, she did not say much..." (156). But when she has started telling her mind out to Ugwu she has felt that there is an unknown purpose behind it and thus she has told him how crowded the train was and people cried and urinated in the train unable to hide their anxiety and agony. Ugwu has become the perfect listener and Olanna's trauma has been articulated as the way she wants it to be delivered.

Compared to Olanna, Ugwu has undergone physical hardships when he has been conscripted by the army. The confusing thing here is the way Ugwu has responded to the experiences he gets from a

series of events after joining the army. It is very evident from the narration that the life of Ugwu is smooth enough till the advent of civil war and later on also he has been under the protection of Olanna and Odenigbo. Ugwu has witnessed how Olanna has undergone traumatic symptoms. During the peak time of the war, the most unexpected thing in his entire life has become a big reality.

He has been conscripted by the army as Olanna cannot succeed in getting him away from them as she has done during the first time. Though he tries to run away from them, he is caught and soon become part of the Biafran army. One of the most disturbing and horrifying scenes from the entire novel is the one that follows after an encounter in which Ugwu has become successful. Everyone in the army appreciates Ugwu for the valour he has shown in the sudden and unexpected encounter that has earned him the title "Target destroyer." During the celebration time, the group does a heinous gang rape of a bar girl and Ugwu also has taken part in the crime. The narration displays the peculiar moment and at the circumstances in which Ugwu rapes the girl.

The scene is clear in the sense that the circumstances in which the incident occurs. Maybe it is not something Ugwu has imagined to happen. Analyzing the character of Ugwu, the character sketch reveals the curiosity of Ugwu towards the act of sex. This act he has done with an innocent girl lasts in Ugwu's mind for a long time. This is not the first time Ugwu is having sex with a girl without actually loving that person, but this indeed is the only moment in the entire narrative that is not consensual. And though Ugwu does it to show that he is capable enough in all means to his fellow people, he has a choice of not doing it, but still, he does it. And it remains with him for too long. The evidence for his long-lasting influence of that memory can be seen after he gets freed from the army. "It haunted him, filled him with shame. It made him think about the girl in the bar, her pinched face and the hate in her eyes as she lay back on the dirty floor"(396).

When he has been recovering from the wounds, Ugwu does not have a clear memory of every detail but he surely remembers the look in her eyes, hating him to the core and the same time

contemptuous too. The writing that Ugwu has continued after his recovery can be considered as an attempt towards this atonement. He has heard the title “The World Was Silent When We Died” when Richard pronounces it the first time as the title of his book that deals with war and the horrible experiences of the people of Biafra. But later the readers see that the real author of the book is Ugwu.

Applying the theory of trauma to Ugwu’s character shows that he is not like Olanna, who has affected to the core and exhibited most of the trauma symptoms that are so typical in people who get affected by traumatic events. This does not mean that Ugwu is not affected or haunted by any means. But as a character, he does not really fit into western traumatic tradition. The self-loathing moment is no way a justification for what he has done, but even later on, he never ever gets rid of the memory of how the girl has looked at him. He does not have any hallucinations and any feeling of a hindrance in expressing what has experienced, unlike Olanna who finds it very difficult to articulate in the first place. Ugwu has never faced this issue. The only reason Ugwu does not tell anyone about what he has done to the bar girl is the sheer fear that no one would tolerate what he has done. He does not have any problem with language and he does not feel any inability to express what he really felt.

Writing is an act of atonement for Ugwu. The agency of writing is finally given to Ugwu and it has multiple possibilities. It is shown in the narrative that though Ugwu used to take notes and write about things he has seen and heard earlier itself, he becomes very active once he recovers from the wounds the battle has gifted him. From then onwards he has started to write like anything because that is the only thing that he has been interested in getting involved with. This is also in stark contrast to the usual trauma affected people who find the inability of the language in giving voice to the feelings they feel or felt.

The fact that differentiates Ugwu from other characters who have undergone trauma is a holding on to narration as a tool. There can be two possibilities for Ugwu being unfit in the typical symptoms of Trauma Theory. The first possibility is that he has been undergoing an inherent latency period as

theorized by Cathy Caruth. Maybe he would come out of it and experience the real trauma symptoms as Olanna experienced after reaching home. This inherent latency is something Ugwu has been suffering for a long time even before the civil war as a part of the postcolonial traumatic condition. This can be supplemented by the fact that during the early part of the narration, Nigeria is a newly formed republic that just got freedom from colonial clutches. No other characters are portrayed like him. Olanna, Odenigbo and all the other university staff are intellectuals who are talking about pan African movement and imperial clutches by comfortably sitting in one place and using their intellect fight for their ideologies. And the native people shown are completely native who do not feel like going high by acquiring English education or lifestyle. Ugwu is the only person who wants to go out of the clutches of being a native and cannot reach up to the mark of being like Odenigbo or his circle of friends.

The second possibility of Ugwu's difference in the experience of trauma might be his comfortable zone as clearly indicated in the novel. The novel in itself creates a much-unexpected twist at the end by giving Ugwu the agency behind the multiple voices and experiences of Biafran people through the book *The World Was Silent When We Died*. The therapeutic effect of the language of trauma must have acted as a therapy for Ugwu who in a way gets relieved from all his self-loathing experience through writing.

Out of these two possibilities, one thing is very much sure that Ugwu is a character who stands outside the generalized postulation that the entire novel is an example of traumatic fiction. While the character of Olanna completely relates to this fact, Ugwu is a character who stands out from the whole structure. In this regard of writing as a therapeutic tool, the character sketch of Richard is very important.

Richard is Kainene's lover who finds it difficult to belong to any group. He has not been a part of his fellow men back in London and he has not felt a sense of belonging in Nigeria too though the only solace he has ever found in his life is Kainene. Richard has also witnessed terrific scenes, worse

and frightening that Olanna has witnessed in the train. The case of Richard is entirely different it seems when going through the narrative. Richard becomes too much worried when he finds out that he has acted very normal yet he is not normal. Richard wants to feel something different after what he has witnessed. He thinks it is not normal to be normal after such a horrible experience of seeing many people getting murdered before his eyes. He has stood aghast at his normalcy and has been horrified about his lack of traumatic memories and how he has acted in an ordinary way. Richard has been a misfit among his companions regardless of his own land or in foreign Nigeria.

Almost at the end of the narrative Richard though tries his maximum to find out Kainene, he cannot and it has been said that he has felt like "...his life would always be like a candlelit room, he would see things only in shadow, only in half glimpses" (430). Without Kainene what Richard loses is a comfort zone and at the same time a solace that would have consoled him when he comes out the inherent latency stage followed by the trauma that has been deeply hidden in his mind. This state continues and at the end, Richard himself realizes that he would never be able to find fullness in his life and he would never find a chance to let out his true feelings. The trauma of Richard is entirely different from Olanna and somehow varied in nature in comparison to Ugwu.

Another aspect is the healing process associated with trauma. In the case of Olanna, there is a healing after trauma. Here the traumatic symptoms do not always disappear but come again as panic attacks with less intensity after a period of time. For Olanna it is not the time gap, but the role of an empathic listener that healed her. Ugwu is not only an active listener for Olanna but an active agent in her healing. Ugwu cannot tell exactly everything he has undergone. Mainly because of the unforgivable crime that he has done, he might have thought that others would judge him and he is right in his decision. But the readers find that there is a healing process that is continued after the period of trauma in Ugwu. Richard is in an entirely different pathway where he does not get healed like the other characters and he has realized this fact at the end. Richard has always lacked a listener and he has failed

miserably in writing about the events he has witnessed. He has totally missed the cathartic effect of writing and finally what remains with him are some memories and uncomfortable, suffocating moments. The basic difference between Richard and Ugwu is the agency behind voices. Where Richard has failed, Ugwu wins by creating the entire book as a postmemory of his life just as Adichie has made *Half of a Yellow Sun*, her postmemory of the past generations. And the postmemory not only consists of the trauma the people have to suffer from a civil war but the trauma of the entire colonial period and how it plays a crucial role in the post of Postcolonialism.

When discussing trauma of the civil war, the trauma perpetrated by the colonial legacy remains hidden or deliberately unacknowledged. The theory of trauma itself concerns with the dominant white with all sense of patriarchy. It does not deal with the ongoing process but limits itself to single incidents. When historical trauma is considered, though the narrative follows on the trauma that occurred from an event, the Biafran civil war, *Half of a Yellow Sun* can be considered a depiction of historical trauma symptoms. But at the same time postcolonial trauma and the ongoing neo-colonial trauma cannot be neglected. Until Ugwu has reached a point where he speaks and feels himself to be comfortable with other people who have got English education and the elite lifestyle, the psychological insecurities faced by a little native boy itself is a kind of trauma. Trauma Theory in literature and the possibility of its application in the concepts of colonialism and gender are the areas that demand further studies. Here Adichie surely has given rise to a beginning where an interpretation can be given by making trauma decolonized.

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