

**There was a Nation: Narrating the Erasure of Biafra and the
Marginalisation of the Igbo in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of
a Yellow Sun***

Dr. Ranjana Das Sarkhel

Assistant Professor, Dept. of Humanities

Shri Shankaracharya College of Engineering and Technology

Bhilai, Chhattisgarh

India

Abstract

The Biafra War (1967-70) also known as the Nigerian Civil War was a result of the genocide of the Igbo people. The Igbo were massacred in a series of coup and counter coups during the years that followed Nigeria's independence. The Igbo dominated eastern region of Nigeria seceded in 1967, declaring itself independent as the Republic of Biafra. As Nigerian forces moved to retake Biafra, a three year war erased Biafra from the map, leaving behind more than a million dead. Nigeria also imposed economic sanctions, blocked international medical aid and relief. While the world community watched in silence the mass suffering of the Igbo, many stories of the war remained untold in the official records.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* presents the human story of this political event which was not only a legacy of colonisation but also reflected the cruel faces of tribalism, oil-politics and economic deprivation. Adichie covers the years leading to the war, the course of the struggle and its aftermath while narrating stories of death and survival, love and loss, betrayal and hope. Her stories are of how the lives of ordinary people are suddenly changed by the horrors of living close to enemy lines, the pain of living in refugee camps and dying without a home.

This paper presents how Adichie narrates the erasure of a nation and its people through the African art of storytelling and the text which Ugwe, a houseboy in the novel writes, and to see how her writing makes a strong political statement as to who should be writing the stories of the marginalised.

Key Words: Biafra War, coup, Igbo, international aid, human spirit, oil-politics

The world has to know the truth of what is happening, because

they simply cannot remain silent while we die.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie,

Half of a Yellow Sun (2006, 305)

The truth which the world had to know was never documented in any official records of the Biafra War (1967-70). The world's information and updates of the war remained confined to the BBC news, Radio Kaduna, reports by western journalists and the disturbing photographs of starvation that became synonymous with the war. Official records of the Biafra War also known as the Nigerian Civil war reported one to three million military and civilian casualties. The photographs of children who were victims of severe hunger and malnutrition caused by the Nigerian blockade garnered sympathy for Biafra worldwide. But the efforts of the world community did not go beyond a few countries recognising the new nation, and in providing relief aid which did not reach Biafra because Nigeria used starvation as a war strategy. The war ended with Nigerian victory and General Yakubu Gowon of the Federal army declared that there was "no victor or no vanquished" and that the end of war was to be "an opportunity to build a new nation." (*Nigeria's War Ends, UPI Online*)

Building a new nation has not been an easy task for Nigeria though the end of the war provided promising avenues for development as the restoration of peace and the reintegration of Biafra into Nigeria was remarkably rapid. Neither the booming oil trade nor any national development plan could bring about peace. Very soon the country faced problems of growing corruption and the government's failure to address several ethnic issues, problems which continue even today. But the story of the erasure of a nation and its people was never forgotten. It had to be remembered and retold because many today still believe in the Biafra cause, as evident in a recent letter from the Biafra Foundation to the United Nations (*Enekwechi, Biafra's Open Letter to UN*) and the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) presents the human experience of this political event which was not only an inhuman legacy of colonialism but also reflected the cruel faces of ethnic violence, oil politics and economic deprivation.

The genesis of the Biafra war and the marginalisation of the Igbo lay in the European 'scramble for Africa'. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, European economic and political rivalries led to appropriation of African territory. The Berlin Conference (1884-85) established 'spheres of influence' that legitimised the control of large sections of the continent by European powers and allowed further colonial expansion. This mindless scramble resulted in a redrawing of the map of

Africa where imaginary border lines cut across traditional tribal boundaries, leading to traumatic experiences in post independent and recent African history

Great Britain carved an area out of West Africa with different ethnic groups and unified it as Nigeria. Three predominant groups of the area were the Igbo, the Yoruba and the Hausa-Fulani, who had different political and religious systems. While in the north the Hausa-Fulani were governed by conservative Islamic hierarchy, the Yoruba in the south west and the Igbo in the south east became beneficiaries of western education and Christianity. The Igbo lived in autonomous, democratically organised communities which encouraged direct participation of individuals in decision making and laid emphasis on social achievement, which in turn helped them to challenge colonial rule. The British ruled them indirectly through Warrant Chiefs. The Igbo dominated region was more unified and therefore more prosperous, which encouraged the literate elites and tradesmen to spread out all over Nigeria.

The years following Nigeria's independence in 1960 were marked by regional and ethnic tensions, trial and imprisonment of leading opposition politicians accused of treason and a violence-marred election in 1964. Sir Abubaker Tafawa Balewa, the first prime minister of independent Nigeria was killed in a coup in 1966 after which Major General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi, an Igbo and the Commander of the army emerged as the country's new leader. Ironsi suspended the constitution and announced that many public services which were controlled by the regions would henceforth be controlled by the federal government. Ironsi was assassinated in a counter coup and replaced by Lieutenant Colonel Yakubu Gowon.

The coup was followed by the massacre of thousands of Igbo in the northern region of Nigeria. In May 1967 Gowon announced the creation of a new twelve-state structure. The Igbo dominated Eastern Region was to be divided into three states of which two were dominated by non-Igbo groups. The division was to sever the vast majority of Igbo from profitable coastal ports and oil rich fields in the Niger Delta. The government policies and the attacks on the Igbo were seen by leaders of the Eastern Region as official attempts to push the Igbo to the margins of Nigerian society and politics. The region's Igbo dominated assembly authorised Lieutenant Colonel Odemegwu Ojukwu to declare independence as the Republic of Biafra.

The Biafra War was precipitated by the attempts of the government to lessen the political powers of the Igbo, and their genocide. As Nigerian forces moved to retake Biafra, a three year war erased Biafra from the map leaving behind more than a million dead. Nigeria also imposed economic sanctions, blocked international medical aid and relief. Nigeria violated the Aburi Accord (1967)

which stated that no would be used to settle the crisis. The war devastated Biafra when the federal army moved south and captured the university town of Nsukka and later Port Harcourt. The better equipped Nigerian army defeated the Biafra forces in 1970. The end of the war marked the erasure of a nation and its people. International monitors, independent observers, journalists and historians estimated three- and -a -half million babies, children, pregnant women and older people dying due to starvation and the displacement of about two million Igbo. (*Enekechi, Biafra's Open Letter to UN*)

The stories of a war cannot be limited to the official records of the dead, the fall of military position or the capture of ports and towns. The horrors of a war do not end as its memories continue to haunt the survivors, change the course of their lives and make returning back to the old life difficult. To Igbo writers, the war presented stories which they wanted to forget but chose to write so that future generations would cherish the Igbo spirit to survive. Many Igbo writers participated in the Biafra War. Christopher Okigbo, the poet lost his life in the war and Chinua Achebe was politically active during the war. He became a spokesperson for the Biafra cause in Europe and North America. Other writers who expressed their commitment to the revolutionary struggle of their people for independence included Cyprian Ekwensi, Gabriel Okara and Flora Nwapa. Achebe in his essay, "The African Writer and the Biafran Cause" writes:

The involvement of the Biafran writer in the cause for which his people are fighting and dying is not different from the involvement of many African writers – past and present - in the big issues of Africa. The fact of war merely puts the matter in sharper focus. (*Achebe, Morning Yet On Creation Day, 30*)

The revisiting of the Biafra War site by present day writers like Adichie in *Half of a Yellow Sun* shows how deep rooted are the memories of the war in the Igbo psyche. To Adichie, the Biafra War and the sufferings of the Igbo are personal experiences passed down to her through memories of listening to stories of the war. Her narration of the war began with short stories like *For Love of Biafra, That Harmattan Morning, Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Ghosts* and she strongly believed that "I have always known that I would write a novel about Biafra." (*Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Website*) She says that she wrote the novel 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 present, 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 my mother cannot speak at length about losing her father in a refugee camp, because the brutal bequests of colonialism

make me angry, because the thought of the egos and indifference of men leading to the unnecessary deaths of men and women and children enrages me, because I don't ever want to forget. (*Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Website*)

Adichie narrates the Biafra war through radio news, coverage by foreign journalists, the book written by Ugwu, and through stories of the war. The news of the coup, the secession, the progress of the war and its end reach the characters in the novel through news broadcasts on the BBC, Radio Kaduna and Biafra Radio. The voice on the radio always commanding control over the information of the war, becomes Adichie's narrative device to present the views of those in power. Adichie also narrates how foreign journalists covered the war.

The two American journalists in the novel visited refugee camps in Biafra along with interpreters, and took photographs of starving children. At each refugee camp they asked:

Are you hungry? Of course, we are all hungry.

Do you understand the cause of the war? Yes, the Hausa vandals wanted to kill all of us, but God was not asleep.

Do you want the war to end? Yes, Biafra will win very soon. (*Adichie, Half of a Yellow Sun, 371*)

These answers made them wonder how, "They can't have eaten a meal in two years. I don't see how they can still talk about the cause and Biafra and Ojukwu."(370) They arrived at conclusions of the war, "Ojukwu will have to surrender. This is Nigeria's final push, and there's no way Biafra will recover all the lost territory."(372)

What escaped their myopic views, are narrated in the novel – how many Biafra soldiers fought without food and shoes, how they practiced with wooden guns, how planes landed at night without lights carrying relief, how lorries were loaded in the dark, and very often the men unloading the planes walked into the propellers, how the tarmac was covered during the day with palm leaves, how they moved the crude oil to their refineries at night in tankers with no headlights, all done to avoid Nigerian bombers hovering above. Adichie writes that these journalists were like, "President Nixon's fact finders from Washington or Prime Minister Wilson's commission members from London who arrived with their firm protein tablets and their firmer conclusions: that Nigeria was not bombing civilians, that the starvation was overflogged, that all was as well as it should be in the war." (371)To them it was just another war, for people were dying everywhere. "People are dying in Sudan and Palestine and Vietnam. People are dying everywhere." (374)To them covering Africa is

not difficult as one of them says, “Am I supposed to feel inexperienced in jungle ways? I covered Asia for three years.” (372)

Richard, the British white expatriate who considers himself Biafran in the novel is asked by Major Madu to write for the Propaganda Directorate so that his writings can be sent overseas. Madu wants him to write “more than just the number of Biafran dead” (304) because,

They will take what you write more seriously because you are white. Look, the truth is that this is not your war. This is not your cause. ...If you really want to contribute, this is the way that you can... they will believe a white man who lives in Biafra and who is not a professional journalist. You can tell them how we continue to stand and prevail (305)

Richard, who had come to study Igbo art, writes about the fall of Onitsha, the implications of the national strike, the census, and the Western Region chaos, but at the end of the war he says, “The war isn’t my story to tell, really.” (425)

The story of the war is written by Ugwu, a house boy who worked in the Nsukka University campus. Ugwu began to work for his master, Professor Odenigbo who taught mathematics. Ugwu listened to intellectual debates that filled the evenings; went to the university school; watched the relationship between Odenigbo and Olanna undergo the trials of infidelity; looked after their child Baby; escaped with them when the university was taken over during the war; lived with them in conditions none of them had experienced before; fought in the war; was wounded but survived to be reunited with his masters family. Ugwu’s experiences take the shape of snippets of a book within a book, and this narrative device is used by Adichie to “anchor the reader who may not necessarily know the basics of Nigerian history. And I wanted to make a strongly-felt political point about who should be writing the stories of Africa.” (*Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s Website*)

Ugwu had planned to write a “big book” (424) and name it “Narrative of the Life of a Country”, the title inspired by Frederick Douglass, but changes it to “The World Was Silent When We Died.” Ugwu designs the book cover and “draws a map of Nigeria and traces in the Y shape of the rivers Niger and Benue in bright red. He uses the same shade of red to circle the boundaries of where in the Southeast Biafra existed for three years.” (82) His narration begins with the prologue that recounts the story of a woman with a calabash with her child’s head inside, crossing the Niger. Ugwu had heard the story from Olanna and remembers the details of the designs on the calabash “slanting lines crisscrossing each other” (82), the child’s head with “scruffy plaits falling across the dark-brown face, eyes completely white, eerily open, a mouth in a small surprised O.” (82)

He narrates the history of Nigeria, how the British Soldier-merchant Taubman Goldie killed to gain control of the palm oil trade, the division of Africa at the Berlin Conference, the Igbo, and how Nigeria got its name. He narrates the story of Nigeria's independence, how the "Second World War changed the world order" (155) and the "Empire was crumbling" (155), the British policy of divide and rule which gave the North control of the government, the different minority groups held in a "fragile clasp" (155) at independence in 1960. Ugwu argues how Nigeria's economy benefited Britain and how after independence the newly discovered oil made the leaders ignore other problems faced by the country. He writes about the 1966 massacre of Igbo, where the varying numbers of the dead did not matter, but what "mattered was that the massacres frightened and united the Igbo. What mattered was that the massacres made fervent Biafrans of former Nigerians." (205) Ugwu writes how "Starvation was a Nigerian weapon of war." (237) It brought Biafra fame, sparked protests across the world, and propelled aid organisations to fly in relief at night. The International Red Cross called Biafra "Its gravest emergency since the Second World war." (237) While Zambia, Tanzania, Ivory Coast and Gabon recognised Biafra, the major powers of the world like Britain, the United States, Canada and the Soviet Union not only remained silent but also aided Nigeria with arms.

The epilogue of Ugwu's book is a poem inspired by the ones he had heard in the Nsukka campus where Professor Okeoma used to read out his poems. Ugwu's poem titled 'Were You Silent When We Died?' is based on the Biafra photographs of 1968, images of "...children with arms like toothpicks./ With footballs for bellies and skin stretched thin." (375) He writes:

You needn't imagine. There were photos
Displayed in gloss-filled pages of your Life.
Did you see? Did you feel sorry briefly. (375)

Ugwu dedicates his book to Odenigbo, "For Master, my good man." (433)

Adichie uses Ugwu's book to tell the world how the Igbo have been pushed to the margins throughout the history of colonisation and in the years that followed Nigeria's independence and also how the Biafra war erased their nation from maps. But what cannot be erased are memories that remain deep within human lives. These memories are remembered, recounted, shared and passed on. At the end of the war Olanna says, "My memory is inside me" (432) and she would not allow strangers to "barge in and take away." (432) It is these memories that Adichie narrates in the four sections of the novel, dividing the early 60s and the late 60s into two sections each. Adichie's narrates stories of people because she "did not want the political events to overwhelm the human

story” and also because she “wanted to write about love and war.” (*Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s Website*) And in doing so, she assumes the role of traditional African storytellers who preserved the stories of their people. Chinua Achebe says that Adichie is a writer “endowed with the gift of ancient storytellers.” (*Achebe, Random House Online*)

The early 60s were years filled with laughter and High Life music at Odenigbo’s house at Nsukka University campus where conversations were on pan-Africanism and newly independent African nations. Odenigbo believed that “the only authentic identity for the African is the tribe” (20) and more strongly that “I am Nigerian because a white man created Nigeria and gave me that identity ...But I was Igbo before the white man came.” (20) The early 60s were the years when the lives of Olanna, her twin sister Kainene, Odenigbo and Richard were changed by infidelity and betrayal and how years later the war would bring greater loss. The early 60s were the years when ethnic clashes began to be felt in incidents like the removal of a “Igbo vice chancellor from the University of Lagos.” (227) supported by the argument that:

Why should an Igbo man be the vice chancellor in Lagos? The problem with Igbo people is that they want to control everything in this country. Everything. Why can’t they stay in their East? (231)

In the western Region there was chaos and the tensions of the outside world crept into the lives of those who lived in the comfort of the ordinariness of everyday life, shattering and displacing them and replacing their dreams with nightmares of uncertainties.

In her narration of the late 60s, Adichie covers the Biafra war – a war that tested human capabilities of living with hope in the midst of inhuman sufferings; a war that instilled a strong sense of determination and stronger bonds of unity among the Igbo, which neither hunger nor the armed attacks could kill. The deep sense of community among the Igbo reflected what Benedict Anderson said, “the nation is always conceived as a deep horizontal comradeship, it is this fraternity that makes it possible, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willing to die.” (*Anderson, Imagined Communities, 7*)

In the late 60s there was a coup and the voice of an army Major on the radio announced that it would “*establish a nation free from corruption and internal strife.*” (123) That evening Odenigbo and his friends rejoiced at the belief that “This is the end of corruption!” (125) but their celebrations were interrupted by “The BBC calling it an Igbo coup.” (125) Though “the coup was in the air” (128) Olanna went to Kano to bring her pregnant cousin Arize to Nsukka, but could not save her and her family who were killed by a mob. The Igbo were being killed everywhere. Radio Enugu announced,

“We have confirmed reports that up to five-hundred Igbo people have been killed in Maiduguri.” (142) there were “eyewitness accounts from the north: teachers hacked down in Zaria, a full Catholic church in Sokoto set on fire, a pregnant woman split open in Kano.” (144) News reached them about organised killings of Igbo in barracks. Colonel Udodo was tied on an iron cross and beaten to death while Madu escaped dressed as a Fulani nomad. But all Igbo soldiers were not lucky,

...they used their boots to find them...examined the feet of each man, and any Igbo man whose feet were clean and uncracked by harmattan, they took away and shot. They also examined their foreheads for signs of their skin being lighter from wearing a soldier’s beret. (140)

Olanna escaped from Kano in an overcrowded train where she sat on the floor next to a woman with a calabash. It was only when the train crossed the Niger that the woman opened the calabash for everyone to see her child’s head inside. At Kano airport Richard saw an Igbo customs officer and a bartender shot. These two incidents would remain imprinted in their memories.

Colonel Ojukwu was seen as the leader of the Igbo, and there were talks about “session and a new country, which would be named after the bay, the Bight of Biafra.” (158) In the Freedom Square of Nsukka University, Ojukwu addressed a large congregation, “Shall we keep silent...ignore the thousands of our brothers and sisters killed” (170) and added “Even the grass will fight for Biafra.” (171) When the federal forces entered Nsukka, they all thought, “Our soldiers will drive the Nigerians back in a week or two.” (177) So when they had to evacuate in a hurry with very little belongings, they were unaware that it would be a long stay away from home. They were unaware of what they were escaping to. What began as a “police action” (180) turned into a war very soon, as Kainene said, “It’s the oil. They can’t let us go so easily with all that oil.” (180)

In the long drawn war “nobody talked about the things left behind. Instead, they talked about the win-the-war effort. A teacher had donated his bicycle to the soldiers, cobblers were making soldiers’ boots for free, and farmers were giving away yams.” (185) The war forced people to flee homes, not knowing where to go, people were,

...trooping on the dirt road...dragging goats, carrying yams and boxes on their heads, chickens and rolled-up mats under their arms, kerosene lamps in their hands. The children carried small basins or pulled smaller children along. (194)

There were air raids where “planes, gliding low beneath the blue sky like two birds of prey ... spurted hundreds of scattered bullets before dark balls rolled out from underneath...” (202) leaving

behind rubble, the smell of burning and charred bodies. Ikejide was hit by shrapnel that whizzed past slicing his head so quickly that his headless body ran for a while before falling.

If bunkers provided a sense of safety, the introduction of Biafra pounds made them proud, as did their national anthem,

*Land of the rising sun, we love and cherish,
Beloved homeland of our brave heroes...(277)*

They worked for Biafra - Odenigbo worked for the Manpower Directorate, Kainene opened a refugee camp and Olanna started teaching children. But the war turned schools to refugee camps and she had to teach them at home. In roofless classrooms, she taught them what the colours and the symbols on the Biafra flag meant.

Red was the blood of the siblings massacred in the North, black was for mourning them, green was for the prosperity Biafra would have, and, finally the half of a yellow sun stood for the glorious future. (281)

Shortage of food forced them to go to relief centres of Caritas and Red Cross where they learnt to fight their way in long queues for pieces of stockfish, dried egg yolk and small bags of cornmeal. There was very little food for babies and salt and sugar were luxuries. Children like little Adanna had only one dress to wear made from the sack used to pack relief food.

While most people survived on the relief, there were also those enjoyed better lives. Adichie narrates how there were those who used their Nigerian passports to fly out, had furnished underground rooms, and stole relief food. She also narrates incidents of rape in refugee camps and by the armed forces. There were stories of young boys being forced to fight during the war. Ugwu was conscripted, hurriedly trained to fight and soon became known as “Target Destroyer”(362). Though seriously wounded, he survived to be reunited with his master’s family. But the war separated the twin sisters – Kainene crossed enemy lines to see what she could buy for her refugee camp, but never returned. There were many others like her who went missing and their families had to bury empty coffins, while still clinging on the fragile hope in “stories of people who had been found, who had come back after months of being lost.” (431)

The end of the war announced on radio praised those who fought with arms for “*their gallantry and bravery*”, and the others who endured the war, their “*steadfastness and courage in the face of overwhelming odds and starvation*” (412) was recognised and thanked. The voice on the radio read:

Throughout history, injured people have had to resort to arms in their self-defence where peaceful negotiations fail. We are no exception. We took up arms because of the sense of insecurity generated in our people by the massacres. We have fought in defence of that cause.
(411)

A war may end when one side wins or the other surrenders, but Adichie's narration does not end here.

Adichie narrates that returning back to what remained of the old life was not easy. It was through roads "pockmarked with bullets and bomb carters" (415) and a frightening quietness that prevailed. While "vultures filled the horizon" (416), houses resembled "Swiss cheese, riddled with bullet holes." (416) Returning back meant hiding the Biafra flag, changing Biafran number plates and burning Biafra pounds, while accepting the twenty Nigerian pounds that was given to everyone after freezing their bank accounts. It also meant retuning to find one removed from their jobs and their abandoned houses occupied by strangers. Returning back would continue to be difficult. They would have to search for their old life not only from the memories of better days but also search through the half-burnt books and the damaged pieces of furniture. More news of the deaths of those they knew would reach them. Life would come back to its old pace.

The weeks passed and the water started running again and the butterflies were back in the front yard and Baby's hair grew jet-black. Boxes of books came for Odenigbo from overseas.
(432)

The rest of their life would have long stretches of pain, moments of faith, hope-filled eagerness, grief and emotions greater and stranger than grief. They would be consoled by words like "Grief was the celebration of love, those who could feel real grief was lucky to have loved." (431) There would be no words for the moments of silence and tears.

Adichie's narration gives words to this love, grief and tears, filling up the silences in the history of the Igbo dream for a nation.– a dream represented by the rising half of the yellow sun. While recounting the story of her people, Adichie accommodates innovative techniques in her narration which makes one think of the world as human rather than material, and how though we belong to the same human race, yet history and politics affect us differently. Her draw on various sources of information to tell the story of the marginalisation and genocide of the Igbo corroborates Foucault's central argument that knowledge is power (*Foucault, Discipline and Punish, 27*) where literary texts have a central role to play in the construction of culture and knowledge. There is an increasing tendency among writers of today to see literature as a space and a medium to voice, account for,

express and demonstrate narratives of prejudice, oppression, sufferings and survival, resulting from specific social, historical and political dynamics of society. Today when Foucault's statement appears more relevant than ever before with writers all over the world seeking knowledge from various sources to possess power and assume control over far-reaching changes, Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* speaks of the freedom of the human spirit which refuses to be crushed by any form of repression.

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