

2017

DIVERGENCES

Editor

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(A DIVISION OF IGNITED-MINDS EDUTECH PVT LTD)
www.horizonbooks.asia

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ISBN- 978-93-86369-86-4

Printed and Published by:

HORIZON BOOKS

(A DIVISION OF IGNITED MINDS EDUTECH PVT LTD)

www.horizonbooks.asia

MRP: INR — 800 /-

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Re-Configuring the Self through Trauma: A Study of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *half of a Yellow Sun*

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Abstract – War, a complex and massive phenomenon that reverberates through literature demands the writer's best skills at evocation because of duties owed to the dead and the wounded. War writing is an ancient genre that continues to be of vital importance and the study of war writing offers ways to explore the labyrinth of human mind. The Nigerian Civil War or Biafran War spanning from 1967 to 1970 has exercised a powerful hold over Nigerian literary imagination and is still regarded as the most important and recurrent theme in Nigerian literature. In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie recreates this crucial moment in modern Nigerian history by weaving together the lives of people caught up in the extraordinary tumult of the decade. The novel centres on London educated twin sisters, Olanna and Kainene, members of the Igbo elite, who are physically and temperamentally dissimilar, and the people closely connected to them. The purpose of the study is to examine how the twins confront the chaos unleashed by war and how their reunion after years of estrangement suggests that communicating lived experience of trauma can be helpful in bringing shattered people together and in rebuilding a broken nation at large. The question as to how trust in traditional values can be regenerated against a background of recent atrocities, human rights abuses, lost lives and suffering with the help of women need to be considered.

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The novel subtly traces the political and social forces that triggered the war, the religious strife, mutual suspicion and wrangling over control of national resources especially oil between the tribes, the Muslim Hausa of the North and the Christian Igbo of the South after Nigeria's independence in 1960 and the resultant emergence of coup and counter-coup. The eventual massacre of the Igbo by Muslim federal forces in the North in 1967 engendered an attempt at secession on the part of the South as the Republic of Biafra, which in turn led to a bloody civil war and consequent besiegement of the new Biafran state by Nigeria. More than a million people, most of them Igbo died of war and of the resultant famine and starvation. The conflict lasted three years and serves in the novel first as the broader background against which the lives of the main characters are set, and then as a source of an all-encompassing and entirely inescapable turbulence which tears their lives apart.

The twins choose very different men as their partners. Beautiful, emotional and idealistic Olanna is in love with Odenigbo, an intellectual who teaches at the University of Nsukka

and relinquishes her affluent lifestyle in Lagos to live with him and gets a job as an instructor to Sociology at the University. Kainene, on the other hand, is plain-looking, sharp, enigmatic and confident to the point of being arrogant and takes up the family business. Her lover is Richard, a bashful, awkward and mild-mannered Englishman smitten by Igbo-Ukwu art and culture and takes up the Biafran cause. Though often acerbic, Kainene's independence and confidence as a woman is admirable and preferable to Olanna's more traditionally feminine weakness and dependence. Then there is Ugwu, Odenigbo's houseboy who gets transported from his village to a world of education and informed opinions.

Half of a Yellow Sun can be considered as a trauma novel as it conveys a sense of profound loss or intense fear on individual or collective levels. Trauma refers to a person's emotional response to a devastating experience that disrupts previous ideas of his/her sense of self and perception of society. A central precept of contemporary literary trauma theory asserts that trauma creates a speechless fright that divides or destroys identity and that the reconfiguration or reformulation of the self is vital to the recovery from trauma (Balaev 19). According to Dr. Judith Herman who elaborates upon psychological trauma in *Trauma and Recovery*.

Traumatic events are extraordinary, not because they occur rarely, but rather because they overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life. Unlike commonplace misfortunes, traumatic events generally involve threats to life or bodily integrity, or a close personal encounter with violence and death. They confront human beings with the extremities of helplessness and terror, and evoke the responses of catastrophe. (33)

As Ronell suggests, trauma can be experienced in at least two ways: "as a memory that one cannot integrate into one's own experience, and as a catastrophic knowledge that one cannot communicate to others" (qtd. in Wolfreys 136). In trauma fiction the individual protagonist functions to express a unique personal traumatic experience, yet the protagonist also functions to reference a historical period in which a group of people or a particular culture, race or gender have collectively experienced massive trauma, thereby suggesting that the protagonist is an "every person" figure (Balaev 20). Thus the fictional figure magnifies a historical event in which thousands or millions of people have suffered a similar violence, such as war, torture, slavery, rape, natural disaster, or nuclear devastation. This leads us to the notion that the perception of the self remains contingent on factors such as a historically specific moment and the socially and culturally ascribed attributes of identity namely, race and gender.

Adichie through her novel registers the difficulty of exploring the atrocities of the war. Her characters Olanna, Kainene, Richard and Ugwu show characteristic traits of dissociation and withdrawal, including the inability to voice their experiences. Olanna after witnessing the slaughtered dead bodies of their relatives find it difficult to explain the harrowing experience. Olanna "wanted to ask Odenigbo to stop being ridiculous, but her lips were heavy. Speaking was a labour. When her parents and Kainene visited, she did not say much; it was Odenigbo who told them what she had seen" (157). In her ineptitude and struggle to discuss the traumatic events that she has witnessed, she exhibits the traits of the traumatized. Olanna has to succumb to repeated bouts of a nightmarish vision of herself being strangled, which she calls "dark swoops." Here we are reminded of Cathy Caruth who in *Unclaimed Experience* says that "trauma is not locatable