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WAR AS A DISCOURSE FORMATION IN *HALF OF A YELLOW SUN*

INTRODUCTION

In the real world just like in the literary tradition, certain objects, events and even character archetypes are encountered over and over again. Often times they are products of the history of a people which even after numerous discussions by different authors, still usually seem to be inexhaustible.

There exists in almost every part of the world a vast body of literature on war. From the primordial tribal wars, the Greek/Trojan wars, the Israelites' wars with their neighbors, the Chinese Civil war, the American Civil War, the Vietnam War, World Wars I & II, the Nigerian Civil War - to the recent wars in Algeria, Sudan, the Congo, the Burundi-Rwanda Civil Wars; the list is endless and continues to expand by the day. Almost every society has one war story of some sort to recount in history books and in fictional works. War has been an ever- recurring theme in human affairs all through the ages. A tragic conflict such as war must give rise to stories because it is an event that is capable of altering the human situation drastically and completely.

The Nigeria-Biafra Civil War provided some Nigerian writers with raw material for literary activity. In Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of A Yellow Sun* as in other Nigerian and African literary texts, the idea of war is predominant as much as it is an unavoidable part of the Nigerian history.

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One of the earliest works on the war is Elechi Amadi's *Sunset in Biafra* (1973) which narrates the author's bitter experiences with the authorities of Biafra during the war. This largely autobiographical work takes the reader through the author's odyssey, and his eventual return to his native Ikwerre land. His war narrative condemns the domineering attitude of the Igbos who, according to the author, dragged other ethnic minorities of the defunct Eastern region into a senseless and brutal war. Perhaps, Amadi's account of the events of those dark days in the turbulent history of Nigeria has been informed by the palpable fear by the Ikwerre of their Igbo kinsmen, especially the Aro who have lived with them for over four hundred years.

However, we must now to go to the main text of discourse. *Half of a Yellow Sun* derives its title from the rising sun motif which we find in the Biafra flag and the coat of arms. The Biafra flag is made up of three horizontal bands of red, black, and green against the background of which a rising sun is foregrounded. This gives a bold announcement of the intention of the text to relive the entity of a nation that existed for such a little time. It is this boldness that makes Chinua Achebe and Binyavanga Wainaina to recognize Adichie's fearlessness, asserting that it takes guts to take on the "intimidating horror of Nigeria's civil war" without looking away.

The text follows on characters and incidents that may or may not be directly verifiable in history books. The characters in the novel undergo dramatic changes as the war begins and intensifies. The danger and violence in Nigeria forced people to quit their jobs, cease their education, and migrate; this caused families to be torn apart. In the novel, the first protagonist, Ugwu, lives with Odenigbo at first so he can become literate and continue his education. The text introduces him as a person who is curious, passionate, and brilliant. However, his life drastically changes when

he is forced to join the army; Ugwu is permanently traumatized after he participates in a gang rape.

In portraying war, the novel draws parallels and creates contrasts, which imply the physical, mental and emotional changes the characters endure. The effects of the war are looked at from the perspectives of alterations that happen physically and also those that go on in the psychological base of the characters. Even in minor characters like the woman Olanna meets on the train back to the south, the text gives a voice: ‘A liquid – urine – was spreading on the floor of the train. Olanna felt it coldly soaking into her dress. The woman with the calabash nudged her, then motioned to some other people close by. ‘Bianu, come,’ she said. ‘Come and take a look.’ She opened the calabash... Olanna looked into the bowl. She saw the little girl’s head with the ashy-grey skin and the plaited 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).

Adichie shows an awareness of the horrors of war even outside Nigeria and Africa. The text makes reference to war scenarios that happened in other places, using them as parallels against Nigeria-Biafra’s situation and to show the universal inhumanity of war. The mention of “the German women who fled Hamburg with the charred bodies of their children stuffed in suitcases, the Rwandan women who pocketed tiny parts of their mauled babies” (82) puts a slight emphasis on how perhaps the desolation of women during war is even more pronounced.

The text shows how family and familial relationships are affected by war. Olanna’s relationship with her parents becomes strained. Odenigbo has to unwillingly leave his mother behind and run to safety. And even worse, Kainene goes missing at the end of the text. The use of several

narrative voices in the story helps in portraying the war in which war and war experiences are collective and yet individual.

For a text that ponders on a theme as serious as war, the narrative style of *Half of a Yellow Sun* is unique in its simplicity and fluidity. Even at that, the depiction of survival is vivid. The novel shows the place of hope in war situations, and the importance of holding on to survival as the sole objective in a situation as harsh as war.

CONCLUSION

Adichie's novel unravels the realities of war beginning with the physical and literal before going into the psychological and emotional facets. It trespasses the boundary of the historical recount of events by interweaving human aspects, turning on multiple microphones for each of these voices to be heard. The theme of war opens up into the bigger theme of humanity where we see characters struggling with issues of love, class, race, profession and family, among others. *Half a Yellow Sun* is an example of one of the many forms where fiction can coexist with history.