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Representation of Female Trauma in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*

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Abstract

While trauma theory has significantly shaped contemporary literary studies, its application to African women's war narratives remains underexplored. This paper addresses this critical gap by examining the representation of female trauma in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Half of a Yellow Sun through an innovative synthesis of trauma theory and postcolonial feminist perspectives. Moving beyond conventional Eurocentric trauma models that privilege individual psychological responses, the analysis demonstrates how Adichie's novel articulates a distinctly African feminist understanding of trauma that intertwines personal suffering with collective historical memory. By focusing on narrative strategies of fragmentation, embodied testimony, and strategic silence, the paper reveals how Adichie captures both the psychological devastation of the Nigeria-Biafra War on women and their resilient resistance to complete erasure. The study ultimately argues that Half of a Yellow Sun expands the boundaries of trauma literature by centring on African women's experiences while challenging Western paradigms of trauma representation.

Keywords: *African feminist trauma theory, Nigeria-Biafra War, embodied testimony, postcolonial trauma, narrative silence*

Introduction

In recent literary discourse, the devastating impact of war on human civilisation has sparked intense scholarly debate, particularly regarding how such experiences are represented in literature. One such harrowing event is the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970), which has become central to Nigerian literary history. Writers from various parts of the world have sought to depict the psychological and social aftermath of war, especially the suffering endured by its victims. Since the emergence of trauma theory in the 1990s, there has been a marked increase in academic interest in literary portrayals of trauma.

Trauma, broadly defined, may arise from diverse sources such as physical violence, abuse, accidents, natural disasters, or the abrupt loss of loved ones. Its manifestations include acute stress reactions, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), intrusive memories, emotional detachment, hyperarousal, and cognitive or mood disturbances. Importantly, trauma is subjective—individuals experience and respond to traumatic events differently, depending on their psychological resilience, coping mechanisms, and personal history. Moreover, trauma can be both individual and collective, affecting entire communities and societies. Understanding trauma in literature thus requires acknowledging its various forms and the complex ways it is processed and represented.

The rise of War Literature has offered a platform for representing the layered traumas experienced across different strata of society. Within the Nigerian literary context, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie emerges as a prominent voice among the third generation of Nigerian writers. Her work engages with gender, race, identity, violence, and diaspora politics (Anju, 5021). Adichie has played a crucial role in positioning African literature within global discourses through her literary contributions. As Madhu Krishnan observes, this third generation of Nigerian writers reflects "the striving of a younger generation to remember the trauma of the past and to forge a sense of kinship and identity through their shared connection in the community" (Krishnan 187).

In her novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), Adichie combines historical facts and fiction to revisit the catastrophic Nigerian Civil War—a conflict that claimed over one million lives. Her work continues the literary legacy of earlier Nigerian writers, such as Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe, who also engaged with the war's brutal realities (Anju 5022). However, Adichie's narrative distinguishes itself through its sustained focus on the experiences of women and its nuanced exploration of the gendered dimensions of war and trauma.

Despite the significant body of literature on war, critical discourse has frequently overlooked non-Western and gendered perspectives on collective suffering. Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* offers a vital intervention in this regard, presenting the Biafran War from a distinctly female and African standpoint. While Krishnan has examined the historical underpinnings of the novel and Matthew Lecznar has explored its alignment with trauma theory, relatively little scholarly attention has been given to the novel's articulation of gendered postcolonial trauma. This paper seeks to address that gap by examining how Adichie constructs an African feminist trauma aesthetic—one that challenges conventional narratives and resists the erasure of women's wartime experiences.

War constitutes a profound social crisis that disrupts individual lives and permanently alters the course of national histories. Authors writing about war often aim to understand its causes, mourn its consequences, and provoke reflection and action. The Nigerian Civil War, in particular, left an indelible mark on Nigeria's socio-political fabric and sparked ongoing debates about national unity and identity. Nigerian and international writers have produced a substantial corpus of fictional and non-fictional literature that interrogates the war's complexities and lasting effects.

However, much of this literature has been produced from an androcentric perspective, focusing mainly on male experiences and silencing or marginalising those of women. The essential roles played by women during the war, as well as the specific traumas they endured, are often underrepresented. This critical gap perpetuates the stereotype of women as passive victims in conflict zones. As Laura Sjoberg asserts, "War has gendered causes, gendered practices, and gendered consequences. It is also lived and experienced in gendered ways" (252). Her argument underscores the necessity of re-evaluating war

narratives to foreground the experiences of women, not only as victims but also as agents of survival and resistance.

Accordingly, this paper investigates the gendered experience of war in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, with particular attention to how women navigate trauma, victimisation, and survival. By highlighting the novel's African feminist trauma aesthetic, the study contributes to broader conversations about postcolonial memory, gender, and narrative agency in African literature.

Theoretical Framework

This study reconceptualises trauma theory by drawing on Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic framework in conjunction with Cathy Caruth's literary trauma theory. Since the 1990s, literary criticism has increasingly engaged with trauma studies to examine how literature represents and processes traumatic experiences. The foundations of contemporary trauma theory are rooted in Freud's early psychoanalytic writings, which introduced a radical understanding of trauma and its long-term psychological repercussions. This approach continues to shape scholarly inquiry.

Freud defines trauma as resulting from emotionally distressing, violent, frightening, or life-threatening events that continue to disrupt an individual's psyche well after the initial occurrence. He argues that trauma is not confined to physical harm but involves deep psychological damage. In *The Ego and the Id* (1923), Freud emphasises that a traumatic event is characterised by its immediate threat and overwhelming and incomprehensible nature. Because the mind cannot fully register the experience as it unfolds, trauma triggers a fight-or-flight response and results in what Freud terms "a disturbance on a large scale." This inability to process the event in real-time forms the basis of its lingering and often disruptive aftermath.

Building on Freud's insights, Cathy Caruth offers a refined definition of trauma in her seminal work *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), in which she describes trauma as "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (Caruth 11). Caruth advances Freud's ideas by stressing the fragmented and belated nature of traumatic recall, showing how trauma disturbs the linear flow of time and challenges the act of representation itself. For Caruth, trauma does not conform to conventional narrative structures because it is fundamentally unassimilated, returning in fragmented and uncontrollable forms.

Freud's trauma theory in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and Caruth's framework in *Unclaimed Experience* provide a theoretical foundation for understanding trauma in literary texts. While both focus on the individual psyche, their work also accommodates broader interpretations of trauma, including collective, historical, and intergenerational dimensions. Both theorists conceptualise trauma as a temporal phenomenon anchored in a singular initiating event whose effects reverberate across time.

This study adopts a working definition of trauma that integrates Freud's psychoanalytic lens with Caruth's emphasis on belatedness and fragmentation, offering a robust interpretive tool for analysing the depiction of traumatic experience in literature, particularly in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*.

Caruth's observation that trauma is "not experienced in the first instance but rather belatedly" (Caruth 4) is especially useful for understanding the protagonist Olanna's fragmented recollections of her pre-war life, which resurface unpredictably amidst the violence of the Nigerian Civil War. However, Adichie's novel necessitates expanding Caruth's model through postcolonial and feminist perspectives. While Caruth maintains that trauma resists representation because it exists "outside the boundaries of any single place or time" (Caruth 8), the trauma of Biafra—rooted in concrete colonial histories and sociopolitical ruptures—demands a more situated theoretical framework.

Judith Herman's feminist trauma theory offers essential insights into the gendered dimensions of traumatic experience. Her concept of "complex trauma," defined as trauma resulting from "prolonged periods of repeated victimisation" (Herman 121), is critical to understanding the layered psychological wounds endured by Adichie's female characters. These women are not only victims of wartime brutality but also of patriarchal oppression that predates the conflict and intensifies its impact. The novel's depiction of sexual violence—as both an overt spectacle and a routine form of subjugation—echoes Herman's assertion that "traumatic events destroy the sustaining bonds between individual and community" (Herman 51), a rupture made more acute by the residual effects of colonial domination.

Adichie's most radical departure from conventional trauma representation lies in her use of the female body as both a site of violence and a vehicle of testimony. Elaine Scarry's argument in *The Body in Pain* that "physical pain has no voice" (Scarry 4) highlights the paradox that Adichie addresses through vivid corporeal imagery. When Olanna observes her emaciated body — "her collarbones jutted out like wings" (Adichie 287) — the visual image substitutes for verbal expression, conveying the psychological and physical erosion of selfhood through hunger and trauma. Such embodied representations of suffering communicate what language cannot, underscoring the novel's emphasis on non-verbal testimony.

Equally significant are the novel's narrative silences surrounding sexual violence. In contrast to Western trauma narratives that often rely on explicit revelation, Adichie employs what Dori Laub calls "the absence of an empathic listener" (Laub 57) to underscore the limits of representation. The novel references mass rapes obliquely—through averted gazes and soiled clothing—rather than through direct narration. These silences generate what Georges Hartman calls "traumatic knowledge at the edge of comprehension" (Hartman 542). The description of restraint heightens the impact of violence by inviting readers to confront the unspeakability of trauma and the ethical complexities of its representation.

The novel's engagement with postcolonial trauma theory becomes most evident in its exploration of historical memory and collective suffering. Frantz Fanon's understanding of colonial violence as "psycho-existential" damage (Fanon 14) illuminates the psychological toll of colonisation on Adichie's characters. Odenigbo, for instance, embodies the crisis of the colonised intellectual, whose idealism collapses under the weight of war, reflecting trauma that precedes but is intensified by the conflict. This intersection of personal and historical trauma reveals how colonial legacies continue to shape the psychological and cultural landscape of postcolonial societies.

Michael Rothberg's "multidirectional memory" theory further elucidates how *Half of a Yellow Sun* situates Biafra within a broader global history of violence. Through the character of Richard, a British journalist documenting the war, the novel explores the dynamics of cross-cultural memory. Rothberg argues that "memory works through negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing" (Rothberg 11), and Richard's role as an outsider who mediates Biafran trauma for a Western audience exemplifies this process. His dual position—as witness and foreigner—highlights the inherent tensions in representing postcolonial suffering within a globalised literary and historical framework.

By drawing on a range of trauma theorists — including Freud, Caruth, Herman, Scarry, Laub, Fanon, and Rothberg — this study foregrounds the complexity of trauma as both an individual and collective experience. In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Adichie constructs a uniquely African feminist trauma aesthetic that resists conventional modes of narration and challenges the adequacy of language in representing suffering. Her narrative strategies illuminate the gendered, embodied, and postcolonial dimensions of trauma, offering a decisive intervention into trauma theory and war literature alike.

Synopsis of *Half of a Yellow Sun*

Half of a Yellow Sun by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a powerful historical novel set in 1960s Nigeria, capturing both the political upheaval and the profoundly personal struggles brought about by the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970). The novel intricately weaves the lives of three central characters—Olanna, Odenigbo, and Ugwu—whose fates become entwined as they navigate love, betrayal, and survival in the face of war.

As Nigeria fractures and war erupts, their once-stable lives are torn apart. The characters are forced to confront devastating losses, unexpected betrayals, and the brutal realities of ethnic violence, famine, and displacement. Their relationships are tested, ideologies are challenged, and their sense of identity is reshaped as they struggle to survive the horrors of war.

Analysis and Discussion

Female Trauma in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*

Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* foregrounds war's domestic and human dimensions, shifting the focus away from direct combat to explore how individuals continue to love, live, and adapt amidst conflict. Rather than depicting the intricacies of warfare, the novel situates the war as a backdrop, emphasising its characters' personal and emotional resilience. Kharoua observes that the novel's narrative prioritises the war's impact on the domestic lives of ordinary people over the experiences of soldiers in battle, a narrative approach he describes as "the mixing of the everyday and the extreme" (210). In this way, the novel highlights women's critical roles in national development while addressing the historical neglect of these roles, often misrepresented through "colonial distortions or nationalist exaggerations" (211). To counter such omissions, Adichie constructs her female characters, particularly Olanna, as embodiments of the Biafran ideal—individuals willing to fight, defend, and endure suffering for the cause. When Olanna and her family are displaced from Nsukka, she actively contributes to the war effort in Umuahia by becoming a teacher for refugee children. Her unwavering commitment to Biafra is particularly evident in moments such as her lesson on the significance of the Biafran flag, reinforcing her role as both an educator and a symbol of resistance:

> She unfurled Odenigbo's cloth flag and told them what the symbols 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 a glorious future (Adichie 212).

When the brightest girl in Olanna's class, influenced by her deep hatred for the opposing side, declares, "I want to kill all the vandals, Miss," Olanna experiences a moment of guilt. However, Odenigbo reassures her that she has instilled patriotism in the child. Throughout the novel, Adichie does not avoid portraying the brutal realities of war, often placing her female characters at the centre of these harrowing experiences. As mothers, daughters, wives, and sisters, they bear witness to the horrors of war firsthand and endure profound personal losses.

Olanna, in particular, is confronted with the brutality of the war when she flees the North following the outbreak of violence. After witnessing the massacre of her uncle's family in Kano, she observes:

> The train was a mass of loosely held metal, the ride unsteady, as if the rails were crossed by speed bumps, and each time it jolted, Olanna was thrown against the woman next to her, against something on the woman's lap, a big bowl, a calabash. The woman's wrapper was dotted with splotchy stains that looked like blood, but Olanna was not sure. Her eyes burnt, she felt as if there were a mixture of peppers and sand inside them, pricking and burning her lids. It was agony to blink, agony to keep them closed, agony to leave them open. (Adichie 213)

While Olanna grapples with the sorrow of her fellow Igbo people and the dangers they have escaped in their flight from enemy territory, the novel offers a glimpse into the collective nature of their trauma. This shared experience is encapsulated when, hours later, a voice cries out in Igbo, *"Anyi agafeela! We have crossed the River Niger! We have reached home!"* (Adichie 214). In this moment, their grief transforms into a collective sense of victory and escape, breaking the silence that had previously marked their suffering. This episode exemplifies cultural trauma, highlighting the formative stage of its lasting consequences. Although each individual has endured unique losses, their shared oppression solidifies a collective identity—one shaped by the traumatic event they have witnessed and from which they are now fleeing. Their euphoric cries at crossing the Niger are particularly significant, as 'home' symbolises a place where they are no longer afraid to speak, breaking free from the silence imposed upon them in enemy territory. This moment not only reinforces their communal bonds but also underscores their status as an oppressed and marginalised group within Nigeria.

This dynamic aligns with Jeffrey C. Alexander's argument that cultural trauma occurs when members of a collective perceive themselves as having been subjected to a catastrophic event that leaves an indelible mark on their group consciousness, permanently altering their identity (215). He further contends that through the articulation of trauma, groups and societies gain insight into suffering, either by apportioning blame or by assuming responsibility. This process of identifying trauma and assigning culpability strengthens the solidarity of the collective, deepening their awareness of shared suffering.

The novel illustrates the stages of collective acceptance of trauma by depicting Igbo identity in the context of war. While Adichie's Igbo characters experience the war's effects in varying degrees as individuals, their collective mourning, grief, and demand for freedom from the oppressive structure of Nigeria—represented in this instance by the North—bind them together. As they flee the hostile territory in a makeshift vehicle held together by rotting bolts, individual trauma merges with the broader suffering of the Igbo people, reinforcing their collective identity. This unification is powerfully symbolised through Olanna's haunting encounter with the woman carrying a calabash containing the severed head of her daughter. This image lingers in her mind even upon her return home.

Following the attacks in the North, the collective spirit of the Igbo people extends beyond individual suffering. The severed head of the young girl on the train comes to represent the head of every mother's daughter, encapsulating the shared trauma of an entire community. Against this backdrop, the act of crossing the River Niger assumes profound symbolic significance. It is not merely an act of physical relocation but a reclaiming of identity; the passengers rejoice not as Nigerians but as Igbos. Adichie's deliberate choice of the Niger River as the site of this symbolic transition resonated with historical events, particularly the Igbo Landing of 1803 when approximately seventy-five Igbo captives chose to drown themselves in Dunbar Creek, Georgia rather than live in enslavement. Just as the Igbo Landing evokes themes of homeland and resistance in the diaspora, the deaths of those who perished in both the North and the Biafran War prompt discussions about the construction of national and diasporic identities.

However, crossing the Niger, while representing a homecoming, does not negate the profound losses endured. The woman seated next to Olanna, clutching the calabash that has served as an object of both horror and solace, remains consumed by grief. Her silence throughout the journey is finally broken, not through words, but through a gesture—an invitation for her fellow passengers to witness the contents of the calabash. In this moment, the novel transforms her silence into a tangible presence, forcing both the characters and the reader to confront the weight of her suffering.

> Take a look, she said again. 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… the woman closed the calabash. 'Do you know,' she said, it took me so long to plait this hair? She had such thick hair. (Adichie 217)

The image of the severed head with intricately plaited hair, presented in a calabash in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, serves as one of the most harrowing and symbolically loaded moments in the novel. It is not merely a representation of physical violence but a multilayered emblem of psychological disintegration, maternal anguish, and historical silencing. This scene is a potent metaphor for the fragmentation of identity and the collapse of societal order under the pressures of war. The severed head—once part of a living, nurturing human body—is now reduced to an object, a grotesque relic of conflict, yet paradoxically still bearing signs of care, tradition, and cultural continuity through the plaited hair. This juxtaposition underscores the dissonance between life and death, presence and absence, continuity and rupture.

Psychically, the severed head becomes a locus of trauma. It embodies Freud's concept of the uncanny (*Das Unheimliche*)— familiar yet terrifyingly estranged. The plaited hair, a culturally intimate symbol of maternal care, femininity, and communal bonding, is rendered horrific when attached to a decapitated head. The horror is not merely in the violence of the beheading but in the grotesque preservation of a symbol of life and identity amid overwhelming death. This contradiction enacts what Cathy Caruth describes as trauma's essential paradox: it is an event that is not fully grasped as it occurs but returns in haunting images and belated symptoms (Caruth 1996). The calabash—traditionally a vessel for nourishment—becomes a morbid container of loss and psychological torment, evoking the uncanny transformation of ordinary objects into sites of terror.

Moreover, the implications of the severed head extend into the realm of collective and intergenerational trauma. Plaiting hair is a domestic and generational ritual, often performed by mothers, aunts, or older women for younger girls. It is a tactile expression of continuity, identity, and care. That this deeply symbolic gesture remains visible on the victim's severed head signifies the irrevocable rupture of such traditions. The war not only extinguishes lives but also interrupts the transmission of cultural memory, feminine agency, and maternal practices. This is a trauma that extends beyond the battlefield: it infiltrates the intimate spaces of the home and the psyche. Judith Herman's notion of "complex trauma" is particularly resonant here. What the image evokes is not a singular traumatic event but the cumulative

effect of prolonged exposure to violence, loss, and dehumanisation, particularly as experienced by women (Herman 1992).

The scene also underscores the gendered dimension of war trauma. While male narratives of war often focus on combat and heroism, this image centres on maternal suffering and the mutilation of female identity. The continued presence of the plaited hair on the dismembered head signifies not only the victim's youth and gender but also the violent erasure of her subjectivity. Yet, her presence persists as a ghostly reminder of all that has been lost—not only a life but also a lineage, a memory, and a set of gendered cultural practices. This recalls Saidiya Hartman's theory of "the afterlife of violence," which insists that the material and psychic residues of atrocity — particularly gendered and racialised ones — remain embedded in the social fabric long after the event itself (Hartman 2008).

Politically, the image exposes the failure of the postcolonial state to protect its most vulnerable citizens. It dramatises the collapse of the civic and moral order during the Biafran war, symbolising the wider disintegration of national unity and humanity. The severed head not only signifies personal loss but also represents the systemic erasure of women's voices from historical narratives of war. The fact that the trauma remains unresolved—both for the characters and within the symbolic structure of the novel—underscores the inadequacy of post-war recovery and the silencing of female suffering within patriarchal and nationalistic discourses.

The psychological impact of this image on the novel's characters—particularly Olanna, who witnesses it—is both immediate and enduring. It catalyses a rupture in her perception of reality, triggering a dissociative state that mirrors trauma's disruptive impact on consciousness. Olanna's repeated references to "the head in the calabash" after the incident signal the intrusive and involuntary return of the traumatic memory, aligning with trauma theory's emphasis on repetition and belatedness. Her trauma, marked by silence and internalised horror, mirrors the broader narrative strategy of the novel, which often withholds confrontation with atrocity in favour of fragmented glimpses and echoes—what Dori Laub terms "the absence of an empathic listener" (Laub 1995).

The severed head with plaited hair in *Half of a Yellow Sun,* therefore, operates as a densely symbolic site of trauma. It speaks not only to the psychic devastation of individuals but also to the broader socio-political crises of gender, memory, and national identity. The image resists resolution or closure; instead, it is a lasting indictment of how war fractures bodies, traditions, and histories. Through this disturbing yet profoundly moving moment, Adichie confronts the reader with the unbearable weight of what cannot be neatly narrated: the enduring, gendered, and intergenerational trauma of war.

In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie intricately explores individual and collective trauma manifestations, particularly among women from formerly privileged backgrounds. The war strips these women not only of material wealth but of dignity, identity, and stability, exposing the fragility of privilege in the face of systemic collapse. The degradation they suffer—evident in their desperate search for powdered egg yolk or condensed milk—is a powerful metaphor for the psychic

dislocation wrought by war. These acts of survival signal more than physical deprivation; they reveal the slow erosion of selfhood and social standing, resulting in a collective crisis of disempowerment.

Individually, characters like Olanna embody a deeply personal trajectory of trauma. A university lecturer raised in affluence, Olanna's descent into a life marked by starvation, displacement, and relational breakdown illustrates the psychological dismantling of identity. Her relocation to Umuahia, driven by war, forces her into proximity with other displaced women, many of whom look to her for leadership or aid based on outdated assumptions about class and education. Her encounter with Mama Oji — who assumes Odenigbo is a physician and, therefore, a source of medical salvation — exposes the futility of such expectations in wartime. When told he is merely a "doctor of books" (Adichie 220), Mama Oji's desperation does not waver, reflecting how survival renders social hierarchies irrelevant. This moment also captures Olanna's psychic crisis: she must reconcile her internalised identity of competence and privilege with her increasing inability to provide for herself and others.

Collectively, the female experience of war trauma is framed not as passive endurance but as active, often desperate, navigation of a shattered world. Adichie resists the tendency to marginalise women's roles in conflict, instead situating them as central figures who adapt, lead, and suffer in ways that men often do not. While male characters such as Odenigbo descend into alcohol-fueled despair, women like Olanna, Mrs Muokelu, and Mama Oji demonstrate a kind of trauma-induced resilience that becomes a collective survival mechanism. Mrs. Muokelu, for instance, is a former schoolteacher who must abandon her educational role to support twelve dependents, including a war-maimed husband. Her consideration of crossing enemy lines to engage in the afia attack (the dangerous underground salt trade) illustrates the extremes to which women are driven. Her psychological trauma is compounded by social expectations and the burden of caregiving, but she adapts nonetheless, at significant personal risk.

The war also distorts familial and romantic relationships, often transforming sites of intimacy into sources of pain and alienation. Olanna's commitment to Baby, the child of her partner's coerced affair, signals a profound reconfiguration of maternal identity, one rooted in acceptance and emotional labour rather than biology or romantic stability. This emotional resilience contrasts sharply with Odenigbo's retreat into helplessness, positioning women as the emotional anchors of war-torn communities. The psychic weight Olanna carries—balancing grief for Ugwu, disgust and forgiveness for Odenigbo, and her maternal responsibility for Baby—epitomises the complex intersection of personal trauma and communal obligation.

Eberechi's storyline, though brief, is a chilling example of how war commodifies female bodies. Her coercion into transactional sex with an army colonel, sanctioned by her parents, speaks to the structural violence women face when economic collapse intersects with patriarchal norms. Her trauma is mainly silent, gestured at rather than explicitly articulated. Yet, it reverberates through the text as a form of what Judith Herman calls "complex trauma"— a cumulative, insidious erosion of self-shaped by long-term exposure to coercion, fear, and powerlessness (Herman 1992). The collective nature of this trauma

is visible in how normalised such arrangements become within the refugee community, demonstrating how systemic pressures warp ethical boundaries and obliterate childhood.

Ugwu's later narrative, drawn from Olanna's recollections, affirms the centrality of women's testimonies in documenting war's psychological toll. His initial inability to process the horrors around him underscores the need for alternative narrative agents. By embedding Olanna's perspective within Ugwu's retrospective text, Adichie reinforces the importance of female-centred accounts in preserving collective memory. These testimonies represent individual psychic wounds and a communal attempt to resist historical erasure.

Ultimately, *Half of a Yellow Sun* presents trauma as both a solitary burden and a shared condition, especially for women navigating the dual oppressions of war and patriarchy. Their psychic crises are not momentary reactions but ongoing states of disorientation, adaptation, and muted resistance. Through characters like Olanna, Mrs Muokelu, and Eberechi, Adichie constructs a nuanced portrait of how trauma shapes and is shaped by gender, class, and social expectation, fragmenting and fortifying women's identities in times of national catastrophe.

Olanna's sharing the horrific details of the massacres with Odenigbo highlights the importance of narrative in trauma theory, particularly concerning testimony. According to Felman and Laub, healing requires bearing witness and entrusting one's story to a qualified listener. Laub asserts that the failure to articulate trauma perpetuates its psychological tyranny (224). In Olanna's case, her initial inability to speak is a symptom of trauma, but her decision to recount the horrors of Kano to Odenigbo signifies the first step toward healing.

Through this act of verbalisation, Olanna initiates her recovery. Her narration is crucial, as it allows Odenigbo to become the conduit for her story, retelling it to her parents, Kainene and Richard, when they arrive. In this way, Odenigbo assumes the role of what Atieh describes as "the other who can hear the anguish of one's memories and thus affirm and recognise their realness" (4). Adichie thus underscores the essential role of storytelling in processing trauma, ensuring that the suffering of women—so often silenced by history—is acknowledged and remembered.

This affirmation functions as a mechanism for healing, enabling the repetition and verbalisation of trauma through Odenigbo if Olanna chooses not to articulate her experience following her initial recognition of the trauma. The trauma Olanna endures in Kano continues to haunt her throughout the novel. However, her recovery begins as she acknowledges the event verbally, allowing her to process the experience. In response, she takes on the role of a wartime schoolteacher, actively contributing to the Biafran war efforts. The significance of traumatic testimony becomes evident when Olanna recounts the image of the child's head in the calabash bowl to Ugwu.:

> She realised that she clearly remembered how [the child's hair] was plaited, and she began to describe the hairstyle, how some of the braids fell across the forehead. Then she described the head itself, the open eyes, the greying skin. Ugwu was writing as she spoke, and his writing, the earnestness of his interest, suddenly made her story important made it

> serve a larger purpose that even she was not sure of, and so she told him all she remembered about the train full of people who had cried and shouted and urinated on themselves. (Adichie 512)

Olanna recognises the broader significance of conveying her traumatic encounter with war. By sharing her story, she contributes to the collective history of the Biafran experience during the civil war. Furthermore, the more she recounts her experiences, the closer she moves toward recovery. Beyond the therapeutic effects of verbalising trauma, Adichie's novel highlights the significance of witness selection. In Olanna's case, storytelling does not yield immediate relief, as she continues to suffer from her "dark swoons" for an extended period. However, her role as a female witness legitimises the female experience of war and underscores the various roles women assume during the conflict.

While still recovering from the psychological paralysis induced by the events in Kano, Olanna remains aware of her surroundings and stays informed about the country's state following the attacks.

> She knew that the university women's association was organising food donations for the refugees that Colonel Ojukwu was now seen as the leader of the Igbo, that the people were talking about secession, and a new country, which would be named after the bay, the bight of Biafra (Adichie 225)

In her silence, Olanna passively absorbs conversations regarding the latest developments in the aftermath of the massacres in the North. These surrounding voices transform her trauma from an individual burden into a shared experience within the collective. As a result, she becomes an informed member of her community, and her suffering becomes intertwined with the broader struggles of her Igbo people.

Also, Adichie presents a deeply textured exploration of trauma, focusing primarily on its psychic implications for women during the Biafran War. Through the twin sisters, Olanna and Kainene, Adichie constructs a layered narrative of emotional fragmentation, psychological defence, and reluctant resilience. Olanna's experience of trauma is marked by denial, a mechanism she deploys to navigate the unbearable realities of loss and betrayal. After witnessing the brutal massacre of her relatives, she descends into a dissociative state, physically ill and emotionally numb—an instance that reflects Freud's theory of trauma as a psychic wound too overwhelming for immediate assimilation. Rather than confronting the full magnitude of her grief, Olanna seeks refuge in routine caregiving and the preservation of domestic roles, particularly in her continued efforts to protect Baby and reconcile with Odenigbo despite his infidelity. This denial of psychic rupture preserves coherence in a world collapsing around her. At the same time, her breakdowns—moments where she cannot speak, move, or eat—signal what psychoanalytic discourse traditionally defines as hysteria: a psychosomatic response to internalised and unexpressed suffering. Olanna's body becomes the medium through which her silenced anguish erupts, reinforcing Elaine Scarry's assertion that pain, especially in its extremity, resists language and renders the sufferer voiceless. Kainene, by contrast, exhibits a different psychic response that aligns with the Freudian concept of sublimation. Rather than withdrawing, she channels her trauma

into purposeful action, managing refugee logistics and navigating dangerous black-market trades to support those in her care. Her pragmatism masks an interiority likely marked by unspoken pain, and her ultimate disappearance during an afia attack becomes an unsettling metaphor for the erasure of countless women whose trauma remains unacknowledged. Within this framework, Adichie also critiques the condescending hierarchies that persist even in crisis. Women like Olanna, formerly shielded by privilege, are stripped of social status and must barter for survival like everyone else. The condescension exchanged between displaced women—such as Mama Oji's assumption that Olanna's husband must be a medical doctor—signals how class-based judgments persist, even as the war collapses pre-existing structures. Adichie further reveals how women's trauma is not confined to the domestic or private realm but is inherently political. These women are not passive victims; they bear the psychological burden of holding communities together while male figures, like Odenigbo, succumb to despair. Olanna's perseverance amid forced conscription, Odenigbo's alcoholism, and Baby's vulnerability illustrate a profound emotional labour that war narratives often neglect. Similarly, the stories of women like Mrs Muokelu and Eberechi offer a collective account of trauma marked by impossible choices and moral compromises—teaching refugee children one moment, risking death for salt or submitting to sexual exploitation the next. In these moments, Adichie resists the conventions of war literature that marginalise women's voices, foregrounding instead their psychic crisis as central to the narrative. The trauma they endure is not merely the result of physical violence but of a broader existential disintegration—of identities fractured, relationships distorted, and futures lost. Through this portrayal, *Half of a Yellow Sun* becomes a historical novel and a feminist trauma text, insisting on the visibility of women's suffering and resilience in the face of social and psychic collapse.

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