



COMPOSITE CONSCIOUSNESS AND MEMORIES OF WAR IN CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S HALF OF A YELLOW SUN

C. Jean Claude* Dr. S. Rajarajan,**

*Research Scholar, Bharathiyar University.

**Assistant Professor of English, Bharathidasan Govt. College for Women, Puducherry.

Abstract

Researches and studies about the Nigerian civil war have examined as reflective of gendered representations of the war. Some have critiqued these representations as informed by the anxieties of the elite – the military, business and politician classes. This paper attempts to examine Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2007) as constructing a composite consciousness of the war. It does this by examining the evolving consciousness of Ugwu, the houseboy in the text. By tracing his evolution, the article aims first to examine the novel as a project of memory, especially trauma memory and how it is played out in the daily lives of the protagonists.

This paper examines how Ugwu evolves from a state of naivety as a houseboy to become a 'vernacular intellectual'. Ugwu is therefore a product of a composite consciousness that embodies composite memories. These memories cut across the daily life of Ugwu's middle class employers, and the trauma of the Biafran war, and his role as a child soldier. The memories are also examined through their individual and collective dimensions.

Keywords: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie; African childhood; composite consciousness; Nigerian Civil War; trauma memory.

In *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2007), Adichie reverts to the everyday, to the shrinking realities that come with the advent of the Nigerian civil war. The war happened in 1967-1970 when the South Eastern states, led by the Lieutenant Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu decided to secede from the Federal Republic of Nigeria, following a period of social, cultural, political and economic tensions. These tensions resulted in a spate of coups and the Pogrom in the North in 1966, where Igbo soldiers and civilians were targeted and killed. The secession led to the self-proclamation of the Republic of Biafra. The Nigerian military regime declared a blockade on Biafra and embarked on police action, leading to a protracted civil war that lasted four years. This war is the subject of Adichie's second novel *Half of a Yellow Sun*.

The story mainly presents the lives Olanna and her fiancé Odenigbo who are a part of an academic community at University of Nigeria Nsukka. Of interest to this article is the voice of their houseboy Ugwu. Adichie presents, through the conversations of the intellectual class at Nsukka, the discourse of an evolving postcolonialism. From the narrative perspective of Ugwu, we are allotted into the daily debates of this academic community. Ugwu's position in the kitchen allows him to eavesdrop as he cooks, serves food and drinks while going about household chores assigned to him.

However, the voice of Ugwu the houseboy represents an interesting critique of an elite consciousness of the Biafran war, especially how it is remembered. This article argues that Ugwu's role as a houseboy, allows him to be constructed as a reliable voice who takes part in the war. Ugwu undergoes an epistemological evolution: as a servant, then a pupil who becomes a teacher during the war, a child soldier and eventually an authorial voice. He embodies a composite ideological vision for Adichie – a marginal subject who finds a voice and becomes a central part of the history being reconstructed in the novel. Ugwu's childhood status in this article partly highlights the rising importance of child figures in Adichie's work as well as her contemporaries. Ugwu embodies the memories of ordinary living that arise out of his role as a houseboy, as well as trauma memories of the war, having fought in it as a child soldier. He is therefore an embodiment of the composite memory scape of the novel which is also informed by Adichie's awareness of the multiple consciousness and subjectivities that inform the war. These memories are found in individual and collective experiences that also account for Adichie's subjectivity as not only an Igbo author but also one whose genealogy is affected by the war.

Ugwu is modeled after an actual houseboy who lived in the Adichie household called Mellitus. Moreover, Ugwu's eventual involvement as a child soldier in the war endows *Half of a Yellow Sun* with a composite account of it. In this way, Ugwu connects *Half of a Yellow Sun* to a wider textual network on the prescient theme of child soldiers, which include the protagonists of Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation* and Chris Abani's *Song for Night*.



Adichie disperses subjectivities in the novel across gender, race and class and the experience of shifting realities of daily life. Ugwu is important as a consciousness of childhood, and most significantly in his role as a child of war who survives and takes on an authorial role at the end of the novel – as an act of redemption, expiation and healing. As a houseboy he provides an account of the daily life of childhood as well as that of the Nsukka academics through his performance of household chores. At around the age of thirteen, Ugwu is native and with a countryside compartment when he comes into the employ of Odenigbo and Olanna. The narrative that ensues can be related to an epistemological journey that sees him engage with modernity, at the advent of Nigerian independence. He eventually becomes a ‘vernacular intellectual’ through a process of gradual assimilation (literacy) into the academic sodality at Nsukka. His consciousness is defined at first by the place Nsukka and most especially by the confines of his Master Odenigbo’s house. .

The return to ordinary life portrays the micro-memories of houseboys and children like Ugwu in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Ugwu’s houseboy status and his historical voice and position in the novel competes with those of protagonists and classes who have hitherto been the main subjects of this war memory. Ugwu’s voice as a houseboy can be argued as *sui generis*, within the vast representation of the Biafran war in African literature. He not only provides the open consciousness of childhood, but also a re-construction of the notion of daily life through his role as a houseboy. However it is interesting to see Ugwu being constructed as not only what Adichie has called the ‘soul of the novel’ but also as a problematic hero who is physically scathed and morally tainted by his involvement in rape (p.365). However, he is also redeemed, at the end of the text, through a very significant act of writing as a process of his expiation and healing. While he is a hero, he is also an anti-hero.

He is confronted by historical discourses and epistemological debates, in a manner that has him listen and watch in bemusing and naïve bewilderment:

‘There are two answers to the things they will teach you about our land: the real answer and the answer you give in school to pass. You must read books and learn both answers. I will give you books, excellent books.’ Master stopped to sip his tea. ‘They will teach you that a white man called Mungo park discovered River Niger. That is rubbish. Our people fished in the Niger long before Mungo Park’s grandfather was born. But in your exam, write that it was Mungo park.’ ‘Yes, sah.’ Ugwu wished that this person called Mungo Park had not offended master so much. (p. 11)

Thus begins Ugwu’s epistemological journey, with an employer who has a revisionist attitude to colonial history, at University of Nigeria Nsukka. While these discourses are meta-critical in relation to Ugwu’s cognitive position as a naïve semi-literate village boy, they begin a build up to the controversial discourse of the civil war and its subjectiveness, in the wake of a history of nationalism within the intellectual class at Nsukka.

Benedict Anderson’s (1991) idea of an imagined community is interrogated by the intellectuals here. Odenigbo, Ugwu’s Master, is already being constructed as a ‘vernacular intellectual’ who is championing for Igbo nationalism. Odenigbo points out that ‘the only authentic identity for the African is the tribe’, and that ‘I am Nigerian because a white man created Nigeria and gave me that identity... but I was Igbo before the white man came’ (p. 20)

Ugwu listens to these polemical debates that foreground the underlying tensions within the nationalist history of Nigeria that the novel is in the process of reconstructing. Identity conflict is already being constructed within the daily life of the academic community at Nsukka. As a university town, it has a cosmopolitan demographic, indicated by the range of ethnicities and races that form Odenigbo’s group of regular interlocutors. In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, history is engaged with through the migration of memories across time, between these two cluster years (early and late sixties). These years are constructed as trajectories of history reflecting on an indelible collective memory of the Igbo nation – times in which heritages and legacies were created and destroyed..

As a novel dealing with historical events, its reflection of domestic histories and memories critiques assumptions about heroism and patriotism. Moreover, Adichie is aware of the need to provide a composite and yet microcosmic account of the war, with an array of protagonists and voices, even though there is always the underlying subjectivity of her own genealogical heritage of the war. In this way therefore, as we argue for a composite consciousness represented by the voice of the houseboy Ugwu, there is on the part of the author, competing consciousness. These arise from her diasporic subjectivity and the need to encourage with the legacy of the Biafran war, which as we glean from her postscript and acknowledgements, informs her own familial genealogy. Indeed, Mellitus (modeled through the houseboy Ugwu) is admitted into the lineage of the Adichie family, through his voice in *Half of a Yellow Sun*.



While the cartographies of violence present a (re)territorialization of identity scapes, they also form terrains of collective trauma as moving bodies, visible signs of physical violence, return to Eastern Nigeria to form a sense of homogenous victimhood, a collective memory of the pogrom and therefore a collective voice. When ‘police action’ is finally declared by the regime of General Gowon, a full scale war begins to take shape and the Biafran nation-state is declared. Nsukka soon comes under attack and Ugwu and his employers flee towards the Igbo heartland. Adichie finds liberty in providing a sequential collapse of towns as the war progresses – Nsukka, Abba, Enugu, Umuahia and Port Harcourt. There is a cartographical (re)mapping of not only landscapes of violence, but also the boundaries of the newly declared Biafran nation-state. Alongside this gradual progression is the movement of people and families towards an uncomfortably marginalized and narrow territorial allegiance as the dreams of a nascent nation are geographically diminished and gradually destroyed. Meanwhile the domestic situation of Ugwu and his employers degenerates from the comforts of a middle class intellectual life in Nsukka and Abba to the radical discomfort of a one roomed mud house in Umuahia.

The return to Nsukka, as Olanna laments is slower, yet the leaving was hurried (p. 432). The process of return is aided by memory, as the protagonists try to recapture the past. The process of return is aided by memory, as the protagonists try to recapture the past. The house, now dilapidated with ‘Milky cobwebs hung in the living room’, with dust notes, spiders and brown walls (p. 418) stands as a relic, a monument of memory, in which a new sense of inhabitation has to be (re)created. There is a new silence at the scars of the present.

The text of childhood is therefore ‘architecture’ of memory as Ender (2005) reflects, as well as an alternative site of memory and history, as Hamilton et al. (2002) espouse. These ‘material cultures’ as Cooper (2008) calls them are aspects of memory that influence diasporic senses of identity from an authorial perspective. They are critical material cultures of memory that allow us to read Adichie’s work as ‘literatures of memory’, with the organizing consciousness of childhood worlds, figures and images.

References

1. Abani. 2007. *The Virgin of Flames*. New York: Penguin. Print.
2. _____. 2007. *The Virgin of Flames*. New York: Penguin. Print
3. Adichie, Chimamanda N. 2004. *Purple Hibiscus*. London: Fourth Estate. Print.
4. _____. 2007. *Half of a Yellow Sun*. London: Fourth Estate. Print.
5. Afshar, H. 2003. Women and wars: some trajectories towards a feminist peace. *Development in Practice* 13 (2 and 3): 178 - 188. Print.
6. Cooper, B. 2008. *A New Generation of African Writers: Migration, Material Culture and Language*. New York: James Currey. Print.
7. Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple*. New York: Pocket Books, 1985. Print.
8. Soyinka, W. 1996. *The Open Sore of a Continent: A Personal Narrative of the Nigerian Crisis*. New York: Oxford University press. Print.