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Colonial Violence and Cultural Memory in *Half of a Yellow Sun*

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Abstract

Aims: *This study investigates the representation of colonial violence and cultural memory in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Half of a Yellow Sun (2006). It aims to demonstrate how the novel reconfigures the Nigerian Civil War (1967–70) as the historical afterlife of British colonial cartography, ethnic stratification and epistemic domination.*

Methodology and Approaches: *The research adopts a qualitative textual analysis grounded in postcolonial theory, trauma studies and memory studies. The study engages theoretical frameworks proposed by Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Cathy Caruth, Marianne Hirsch, Paul Ricoeur, Pierre Nora and Jan Assmann. Through close reading, the paper analyses narrative structure, characterisation, temporality and symbolic motifs to explore how colonial legacies shape post-independence violence and mnemonic reconstruction.*

Outcome: *The analysis reveals that the novel situates the Biafran War within a continuum of colonial structural violence. Adichie employs fragmented chronology, polyphonic narration and embedded testimony to depict trauma's disruption of linear history. The narrative reclaims subaltern voices, particularly women and marginalised civilians and challenges official historiography that suppresses Biafran memory.*

Conclusion and Suggestions: *The study concludes that Half of a Yellow Sun (2006) functions as a counter-archival text that transforms personal trauma into collective cultural memory. It suggests further comparative research on African post-memory narratives and interdisciplinary studies integrating literary trauma with archival historiography to deepen understanding of postcolonial remembrance.*

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The Nigerian Civil War (1967–70), often referred to as the Biafran War, remains one of the most traumatic episodes in modern African history. Although it unfolded after Nigeria's independence from Britain in 1960, its roots lie deeply embedded in colonial governance, territorial amalgamation, and ethnic stratification. In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Adichie revisits this violent rupture not simply as a historical reconstruction but as a literary act of remembrance. The novel challenges official historiography, foregrounding the lived experiences of civilians whose suffering was overshadowed by geopolitical narratives.

This article argues that Adichie situates the Biafran War within a continuum of colonial violence and reconstructs it through a poetics of cultural memory. By blending fictional narration with historical testimony, she creates a narrative that functions as counter-history to colonial archives. Through characters such as Ugwu, Olanna, Richard, and Odenigbo, Adichie stages the interrelation between individual trauma and collective remembrance. By deploying a testimonial mode and fragmented narrative structure, she inscribes traumatic memory into literature as cultural resistance. The work thus operates at the intersection of postcolonial critique and trauma theory, exposing how colonial epistemologies continue to shape national identities and collective forgetting. The novel thereby participates in what Marianne Hirsch terms postmemory, wherein later generations inherit traumatic histories through narrative and affect (Hirsch 5).

The discussion proceeds through five major sections: theoretical framework; colonial cartography and structural violence; trauma, temporality, and testimonial narration; gendered memory and ethical witnessing; and cultural memory, postmemory, and counter-archival practice. A comprehensive reading of *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) requires an interdisciplinary framework that synthesises postcolonial theory, trauma studies and memory studies. These fields collectively illuminate how literature mediates historical violence and constructs mnemonic communities. Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (2004) conceptualises colonialism as systemic violence that reorganises both territory and consciousness. For Fanon, colonial domination does not merely exploit economically; it produces psychic alienation and entrenched hierarchies. Colonial

borders in Africa, arbitrarily imposed during the Berlin Conference of 1884–85, fragmented preexisting cultural formations. Nigeria's amalgamation in 1914 exemplifies what Fanon describes as the colonial compartmentalised world, divided along racial and ethnic lines.

Edward Said's theory of Orientalism further clarifies how imperial discourse constructs colonised spaces as objects of representation. Through what Said calls imaginative geography, colonial powers define territories in ways that justify domination. In Adichie's novel, the legacy of such discursive mapping persists in the form of ethnic stereotypes and political marginalisation. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's interrogation of subaltern speech underscores the difficulty of recovering marginalised voices from imperial archives. *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) can be read as an attempt to answer Spivak's question, Can the subaltern speak? by granting narrative agency to characters historically excluded from state-cantered histories.

Trauma studies, particularly the work of Cathy Caruth, emphasise the belated and repetitive nature of traumatic experience. Trauma resists assimilation into narrative coherence; it returns as fragment, flashback or silence. Dominick LaCapra distinguishes between acting out (repetition without resolution) and working through (critical engagement with memory). These concepts illuminate the novel's oscillation between fragmented recollection and attempt at narrative reconstruction. Paul Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity posits that memory becomes meaningful through emplotment. Yet Ricoeur also warns against manipulative uses of memory. Adichie's narrative negotiates this tension by acknowledging the impossibility of total recovery while insisting on ethical remembrance.

Jan Assmann defines cultural memory as the institutionalised remembrance of shared pasts through texts, rituals and symbols. Pierre Nora's notion of *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory) suggests that when lived memory fades, symbolic sites preserve collective identity. The Biafran flag's half of a yellow sun becomes such a site within Adichie's narrative. Marianne Hirsch's concept of post-memory describes the transmission of traumatic history to subsequent generations. Although Adichie did not witness the war, she inherits its

memory through familial and national narratives. The novel thus embodies post-memory by transforming inherited trauma into literary testimony. Together, these theoretical frameworks provide a foundation for analysing how colonial violence mutates into postcolonial catastrophe and how narrative becomes a vehicle for cultural survival.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) powerfully exposes how colonial cartography functions as a form of structural violence, shaping not only political boundaries but also social hierarchies and ethnic tensions that culminate in the Nigerian Civil War. The novel is set against the backdrop of Biafra's secession (1967–1970), a conflict rooted in the arbitrary borders drawn by British colonial authorities who merged diverse ethnic groups, Igbo, Hausa-Fulani and Yoruba, into one entity called Nigeria. These colonial maps were not neutral geographic representations; they were instruments of power that disregarded preexisting cultural, linguistic and political realities. By compressing multiple nations into a single state for administrative convenience and economic extraction, British colonialism created a fragile national identity prone to fragmentation. In the novel, this inherited instability manifests in ethnic suspicion, political coups and ultimately genocidal violence against the Igbo people. The structural violence embedded in colonial cartography becomes visible through the massacres in the North, where Igbo characters like Olanna's relatives are slaughtered, demonstrating how lines drawn on a map can transform difference into deadly division.

Adichie also illustrates how colonial mapping systems reorganised economic and educational structures in ways that privileged certain regions and intensified inequality. Through Odenigbo's intellectual discussions and the university environment in Nsukka, the narrative critiques how colonial legacies shaped post-independence governance. The British policy of indirect rule empowered Northern elites while fostering regional imbalance, leaving Nigeria politically unstable after independence. This imbalance is a form of structural violence because it produces unequal access to power, resources, and security without requiring overt force. The war that followed Biafra's declaration of independence is not simply a spontaneous ethnic conflict; it is the violent

aftershock of colonial administrative design. The maps that once served imperial trade now become battle maps, dividing territories into federal and secessionist zones. As Biafra shrinks under military assault, the repeated redrawing of boundaries symbolises the continuing violence of imposed geography. Civilians suffer starvation, displacement and bombing, revealing how geopolitical abstractions translate into bodily harm.

Furthermore, the symbolic presence of the Biafran flag, with its half of a yellow sun, represents an attempt to reclaim cartographic and national identity from colonial imposition. The image of the rising sun evokes hope and rebirth, suggesting the possibility of self-determination beyond colonial borders. Yet Adichie complicates this symbolism by depicting internal class divisions and moral ambiguities within Biafra itself. Structural violence persists even within the secessionist state, as food scarcity, corruption and gendered expectations continue to marginalise vulnerable populations. Characters like Ugwu and Olanna experience war differently depending on their class and gender positions, underscoring how violence is embedded in social systems, not only in armed conflict. Ugwu's forced conscription into the Biafran army illustrates how nationalist projects can reproduce coercive structures, while women bear disproportionate burdens of caregiving and sexual violence. In this way, the novel suggests that dismantling colonial cartography alone is insufficient if underlying hierarchies remain intact.

Thus, the novel presents colonial cartography as a foundational act of structural violence whose consequences reverberate through personal and collective histories. The British-imposed borders of Nigeria are shown not as static lines but as living forces that shape identity, belonging and exclusion. Adichie reveals how the violence of mapping,of deciding who belongs within which boundary, creates conditions where ethnic difference becomes politicised and weaponised. The Nigerian Civil War emerges as both a struggle against and a product of these inherited borders. By interweaving intimate human stories with geopolitical realities, Adichie transforms abstract colonial policies into tangible suffering and resilience. The novel ultimately argues that the legacies of colonial mapping cannot be understood solely through political history; they must also be

read in the scars borne by individuals whose lives are circumscribed by lines drawn long before they were born.

The novel intricately weaves trauma, temporality and narrative fragmentation to mirror the psychological and historical ruptures caused by the Nigerian Civil War. The novel's structure, moving back and forth between the early 1960s and the late 1960s, disrupts linear time and reflects the disorienting effects of trauma on memory and experience. Rather than unfolding chronologically, the narrative oscillates between moments of relative peace and the escalating horrors of war, creating a temporal instability that mirrors the characters' fractured realities. Trauma, in the novel, resists smooth narration; it intrudes abruptly, much like the sudden outbreaks of violence that shatter domestic life. By refusing a straightforward timeline, Adichie formally enacts the disruption that war imposes on personal and collective histories, suggesting that traumatic experience cannot be neatly ordered or resolved.

The fragmentation of the narrative also reflects the psychological fragmentation of characters such as Olanna, Ugwu and Richard. Olanna's memory of witnessing the massacre of her relatives in the North returns in haunting flashes, particularly in the recurring image of her aunt's severed head carried in a calabash. This image functions as a traumatic kernel that defies assimilation into ordinary narrative flow. It resurfaces unexpectedly, emphasising how trauma collapses temporal boundaries- past violence erupts into the present, refusing containment. Similarly, Ugwu's experience as a child soldier culminates in his participation in sexual violence, an event that later shapes his guilt and silence. The narrative does not dwell on this moment in graphic detail; instead, it registers its psychological weight through ellipsis and aftermath, demonstrating how trauma is often expressed through gaps and absences rather than explicit articulation. These silences and discontinuities become narrative strategies that replicate the incompleteness of traumatic memory.

Temporality in the novel is further complicated by the interplay between individual memory and national history. The looming presence of Biafra's rise and fall structures the narrative, yet the outcome is known from the beginning: Biafra will not survive. This retrospective awareness infuses earlier scenes with

dramatic irony and melancholy, as moments of optimism are shadowed by impending loss. The structure thereby captures what might be called anticipatory trauma, the sense that catastrophe is always approaching. Moreover, the shifting focalization among characters disrupts any single authoritative account of history. Ugwu's eventual authorship of the embedded text, "The World Was Silent When We Died," foregrounds storytelling itself as a means of working through trauma. Writing becomes an act of reclaiming temporal coherence, a way to stitch together fragmented experiences into a narrative that resists erasure. Yet even this act of narration acknowledges its limits; no single story can fully contain the enormity of war.

Through its fragmented structure and non-linear temporality, Half of a Yellow Sun suggests that trauma reshapes not only memory but also the very form of storytelling. The war fractures time into before and after, creating a permanent rupture in personal identities and national consciousness. Adichie's narrative technique refuses closure, mirroring the enduring scars left by violence. The oscillation between past and present underscores the persistence of traumatic memory, while the gaps and silences in the text signal the difficulty of articulating suffering. In this way, the novel does not simply depict trauma; it formally embodies it, using fragmentation and disrupted temporality to convey how deeply war unsettles both lived experience and narrative possibility.

The novel offers a profound meditation on gendered memory and ethical witnessing by centring women's experiences within the historical catastrophe of the Nigerian Civil War. While the war has often been narrated through military and political discourse, Adichie reorients memory toward domestic spaces, intimate relationships and embodied suffering. Through characters such as Olanna and Kainene, the novel foregrounds how women remember differently; not because memory itself is inherently gendered, but because women occupy distinct social positions that shape what they see, endure and later recall. Olanna's traumatic memory of the massacre of her relatives, for instance, is not framed through battlefield heroics but through the intimate horror of familial loss, particularly the haunting image of her aunt's severed head. Her memory becomes a site of ethical testimony, bearing witness to violence that official histories often

reduce to statistics. In this way, Adichie situates women not merely as victims of war but as crucial custodians of its moral record.

Gendered memory in the novel is also deeply tied to the body. Women's bodies become literal and symbolic battlegrounds; subject to displacement, starvation, sexual violence and the burdens of caregiving. Olanna's experience of rape by a soldier in Kano and later Ugwu's participation in sexual violence as a conscripted soldier expose the gendered asymmetry of wartime suffering. Yet Adichie refuses to present women solely as passive recipients of harm. Kainene's leadership of a refugee camp illustrates a form of ethical witnessing grounded in action. She does not simply observe suffering; she responds to it through pragmatic intervention, organising food distribution and negotiating with relief agencies. Her role complicates traditional gender hierarchies by positioning a woman as a figure of authority and moral clarity in a collapsing nation. Through Kainene, Adichie suggests that ethical witnessing involves responsibility; an active engagement with the suffering of others rather than detached observation.

The novel also interrogates who has the right to tell the story of Biafra. Richard, the British expatriate, initially attempts to write about Igbo-Ukwu art and later about the war itself. However, his position as an outsider complicates his claim to narrative authority. His eventual relinquishing of authorship to Ugwu signals a shift toward insider testimony. Yet even Ugwu's authorship is ethically fraught, given his complicity in wartime violence. This layered authorship highlights that ethical witnessing requires self-reflection and acknowledgement of one's positionality. Women's memories, particularly Olanna's and Kainene's, serve as moral anchors within this contested narrative space. Their recollections are not grand ideological statements but deeply personal accounts that insist on the human cost of political conflict.

So, the novel presents gendered memory as a crucial form of resistance against historical erasure. Women's experiences challenge militarised narratives that prioritise strategy and victory over loss and survival. Ethical witnessing, in Adichie's vision, is not simply about recording events but about honouring the dignity of those who suffered. By centring women's voices and embodied memories, the novel expands the scope of war literature to include domestic grief,

emotional labour and moral accountability. It suggests that to remember ethically is to confront uncomfortable truths, to acknowledge complicity, and to ensure that the silenced, especially women, are restored to the historical record.

The novel operates as a powerful site of cultural memory, constructing a counter-history of the Nigerian Civil War that resists official silences and state-sanctioned forgetting. In postwar Nigeria, public discourse often minimised or strategically avoided sustained engagement with Biafra's secession and the atrocities committed during the conflict. Adichie intervenes in this culture of amnesia by re-narrating the war from the perspective of ordinary Igbo lives, foregrounding experiences that are frequently excluded from dominant national historiography. Cultural memory in the novel is not preserved through monuments or state archives but through storytelling, domestic recollection and communal suffering. The recurring depictions of hunger, displacement and loss create an archive of affect, ensuring that the emotional and moral realities of Biafra remain accessible to later generations. In doing so, the novel challenges the authority of official narratives and asserts literature as an alternative repository of historical truth.

As a counter-history, the novel destabilises triumphalist or reductive accounts of postcolonial nationhood. Rather than presenting Nigeria as a seamless project of unity after independence, Adichie exposes the fractures that culminated in genocide and mass starvation. The embedded manuscript, "The World Was Silent When We Died," functions as a metafictional gesture toward counter-historical writing. It reframes the war not simply as a failed secession but as a humanitarian catastrophe marked by global indifference. The title itself indicts the international community, suggesting that silence is complicit in violence. By situating this text within the larger narrative, Adichie emphasises that history is constructed, contested, and often suppressed.

The novel also resonates strongly with the concept of post-memory, a term often associated with the transmission of trauma to subsequent generations. Although Adichie herself belongs to a generation born after the war, her narrative demonstrates how inherited memories shape identity and collective consciousness. Through the intimate reconstruction of events she did not

personally witness, Adichie performs a literary act of post-memory, bridging the temporal gap between lived experience and inherited trauma. Thus, Half of a Yellow Sun positions cultural memory as both fragile and necessary. It reveals how counter-histories emerge from marginalised voices and how post-memory sustains connections to a painful past that official narratives might prefer to erase. By blending personal testimony, fictional reconstruction, and historical fact, Adichie transforms the novel into a living archive, one that insists on remembrance as a form of justice.

Drawing together the concerns of trauma and temporality, gendered memory and ethical witnessing and cultural memory, counter-history and post-memory in *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), it becomes clear that Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie constructs the novel as more than a historical narrative of the Nigerian Civil War; she shapes it into an ethical archive of lived experience. The fragmentation of time within the text mirrors the fragmentation of both personal identity and national unity, demonstrating how trauma resists linear narration and refuses closure. By disrupting chronology, Adichie formally enacts the instability that war produces, suggesting that memory itself becomes fractured under the weight of violence. The oscillation between past and present, hope and devastation, embodies the persistence of traumatic memory, revealing that the past continually intrudes upon and reshapes the present.

At the same time, the novel foregrounds gendered memory as a crucial corrective to militarised and masculinist histories of conflict. Through Olanna and Kainene, Adichie reframes war not solely as a sequence of battles and political decisions, but as an intimate catastrophe experienced in kitchens, refugee camps and broken families. Ethical witnessing emerges as a central moral imperative: to remember responsibly, to acknowledge complicity, and to centre the dignity of those who suffered. The layered authorship within the novel further complicates questions of narrative authority, underscoring that the act of telling history is itself ethically charged. Memory, in this sense, is not passive recollection but active responsibility.

Finally, as a work of cultural memory and post-memory, the novel functions as a counter-history that resists national amnesia. By reconstructing

Biafra's story through intimate, character-driven narration, Adichie challenges official silences and asserts literature as a vital space for historical redress. The transmission of trauma across generations, whether through children growing up amid war or through the author's own retrospective engagement, demonstrates how the legacy of violence endures beyond the battlefield. Ultimately, the novel insists that remembering is a political act. Through fragmented temporality, gendered testimony and counter-historical reconstruction, the novel affirms that storytelling is both an ethical obligation and a means of resisting erasure, ensuring that the suffering of Biafra remains part of collective consciousness rather than consigned to silence.

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