

# OPEN WOUND AND THE NIGERIAN CIVIL WAR: A METAPHORICAL READING OF KAINENE'S LOSS IN CHIMAMANDA ADICHIE'S *HALF OF A YELLOW SUN*.

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## ABSTRACT

Notwithstanding the diverse motivations behind wars and the justifications given by their perpetrators, the magnitude of agony, suffering and trauma which culminate into loss as experienced by war victims are quite monumental. Hence, after wars, efforts are made towards reconciliation through which healing is predicted. In *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), therefore, Chimamanda Adichie through the character of Kainene metaphorically demonstrates the socio-political, cultural, economic and psychological loss the Igbos experienced collectively during and after the Biafran /Nigerian war. The notion of traumatized individuals has dominated the criticisms of the novel so far. However, in seeking to advance this opinion, this paper interrogates the collective wound/loss the Igbos experienced during the war and how this wound is still ongoing as an open wound that refuses to be healed, which the critics of the novel have paid little attention to. Therefore, focusing on Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, which depicts trauma as an open wound, and through which this paper is analyzed, this article concludes that the disappearance of Kainene after the war symbolically embodies an open wound in the lives of the Igbos as a group that is yet to be healed indicating a denial of closure.

**Keywords:** Trauma, Open wound, Nigerian/Biafran war, Chimamanda Adichie

## INTRODUCTION

Chimamanda Adichie's literary incursion into global limelight, partly, hinges on her deep commitment to the projection of socio-political, economic and cultural obstructions the Igbos endured particularly during the Biafran/Nigerian war (1967-1970). These obstructions, however, culminated into a recurrent loss that has dominated the post war ambiance of the Igbo ethnic group. Narrating the historical account of any war has been the major preoccupation of many writers. Both the historians and fiction writers have, over the centuries, demonstrated profound fidelity in chronicling violent events that had changed the diverse course of human history. Therefore, when *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) was published the ovation that overwhelmed its reception, simply revolves around the dexterity of its historical accuracy. Coupled also, with the fact that the author is not among the "eye witness" generation rather she was born seven years after the war! Adichie's imaginative prowess came to bear as she adeptly navigates the traumatic paradigm of the Nigerian civil war in *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) revealing the psychological and physical disproportions that epitomized the survival of the Igbo people caught up in the Nigerian civil war conflict. This coincides with Spleth's (2017: 137) affirmation that "Adichie's narrative dramatizes the real human dimension of the... struggle, finding the courage to survive in the face of constant 'displacement, insecurity, and deprivation, and learning to depend on each other in solidarity, born out of experience rather than ideology'".

The novel conscientiously traces the tragedies that define the socio-political structure of the Nigerian state between 1967 and 1970.

Employing various voices of account typical of trauma narrative, Adichie captures the Nigerian civil war in its most horrendous dimension as well as the underlying consequences both on the geographical and human spheres. Functioning as an intellectual power arena, Odenigbo's house, provides not only a favorable environment for socio-political engagements but also a rallying point for academic interactions of some university lecturers, which gradually disintegrates into chaos as the university town fell to the federal troop. From this house, all the characters involved in the interactions except Miss Adebayo, is taken into the ordeals of the civil war including Ugwu, the houseboy. The characters' encounters before and during the war reveal that the human tragedy of the war was not only a colossal loss but also that the individuals witnessed a gradual psychological disenchantment that ravaged their lives.

Given the fact that the Igbos lost the war, it is not far-fetched that they seemed to have remained marginalized in almost every facet of Nigerian polity. In relation to the thematic preoccupation of this article, Mabura (2008:206) reveals that "Kainene serves to foreground her disappearance and its wider 'implications of Igbo loss of political, judicial, and sovereign powers under, first, the colonial government and, second, the Nigerian federal state". By implication, this loss in its entirety symbolically represents an open wound that defies healing in the psyche of the Igbos long after the war has ended. To Nwankwo (2008, p.6), "The Nigeria civil war, tells its own story, too ... probably of a tragedy that is still unfolding. In other words, the tragedy of the civil war still festers in the present-day polity of the Nigerian nation. Abayomi (2017:5), while describing the character of Kainene emphasizes that "this 'amphibian' character carries with her extra baggage, which are the burden of history and the collective angst of a 'defeated' people who have had to wait for over forty years to be reabsorbed and reintegrated into the country Nigeria."

*Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), therefore, establishes a connection between the revived Biafran agitation and the author's conceptions of the war experience through the employment of trauma as an open wound. A wound that is synonymous with the historical violence against the Igbos, partly under the colonial government and post-colonial Nigeria especially during and after the war; and its apparent manifestation of their socio-political, economic and cultural marginalization. Lending credence to Nnolim's (2010:145) assertion that "The world created by Adichie is one of betrayal, death, conflict and loss. The Igbo were victims, also, of the residual shenanigans and schemings of British imperial policy in Nigeria".

Trauma, as a subject, has been employed immensely in the analyses of Nigerian civil war literature. This is so because it captures not only the magnitude of loss but also the severity of such loss. Also, it helps to access the level of healing from such loss whether there is progress or not. The echoes of this loss, however, has continued to resonate eloquently in the form of resurgence of Biafra nation in varying degrees of agitations from the separatist groups of Ralph Uwazurike's Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) through Nnamdi Kanu's Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) to Simon Ekpa's Eastern Security Network (ESN).

Undoubtedly, the aspect of subjecting *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) to the socio-political, economic and cultural experiences of the Igbo's after war as an open wound that refuses to be healed has not received much critical attention. Although Novak (2008:34) appraises the novel from the traumatic viewpoint; she merely contends that the work is a "site of trauma: the lingering effects of colonialism". Her concern focuses on the effects of colonialism that

eventually metamorphosed into civil war with its attendant trauma. Her analysis, however, addresses the trauma of the past experiences and does not point to the ongoing trauma that is obtainable in the lives of the Igbos in contemporary Nigeria. Again, Abayomi (2017:6) posits that the novel uses Kainene as an archetype for the Igbo's quest for integration within the social framework of the Nigerian state. He interrogates that "If Kainene and Olanna are one, and Olanna is in retrospect Adaobi, then it behooves Adichie as the creator of this reconstruct to remind her people of the Biafran archetype in their search for acceptance within the Nigerian state." Abayomi compares the character of Kainene as an archetypal loss of the Igbos to the loss of the war but did not expose the various manifestations of the loss. Moreover, he did not subject the article to any theoretical framework to substantiate his narrative. However, not only employing Kainene's loss symbolically as a wound that is still ongoing in the collective vibes of the Igbos, this article relies on the trauma theory of Cathy Caruth to demonstrate that Kainene's loss is a metaphor of an open wound in the psyche of the Igbos within the contemporary Nigerian state.

### **OPEN WOUND AND TRAUMA THEORY**

Trauma study seems a well suited theory for war novels. This is because as a theory, trauma relives the story of wounds that are induced during and after conflict or violent situation. De Mey explains that "Trauma as field of study goes back to the early twentieth century which is the time when Sigmund Freud developed his theory of psychoanalysis. He was the one who changed the meaning of the term "trauma" from indicating "physical injury" to psychological injury" (34). This theory started with his study of the cause of psychosis in hysterical women whose investigation is similar to that of the French neurologist Jean Martin Charcot (qtd, in Bessel Van Der Kolk and Onno Van Der Hart (158). Charcot's examination of hysterical women led to the comparison between mental illness and trauma paying particular interest to the uniqueness of traumatic symptoms like sudden paralysis, amnesia, sensory loss and convulsions.

Trauma is considered as a devastating situation that affects the psychology of people who were confronted with an injury. Etymologically, trauma originates from the Greek word "wound" which originally means an injury to the body. As time progresses, there is a shift which redefined the wound from a bodily infliction to that of the mind. Studies show that trauma is a medical term used to refer to a wound or external bodily injury, or a mental injury, triggered by emotional distress. Cloete and Mlambo citing Rodi-Risberg considers trauma as a phenomenon that is too shocking to be fully registered upon occurrence. It is only experienced belatedly. It offers specific challenges to traditional notions of referentiality (14). However, in the words of Caruth the "wound of the mind is not like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor" (4). Thus, trauma is both an immediate experience of the wounding, and the belated effects of that wound in form of dreams, hallucinations, flashbacks, repeated actions which are the hallmark of trauma theory.

From the definitions so far, trauma manifests not only in the physical body and the psychic realm but also in the emotional makeup of a person. In other words, the continuation of violence in man's immediate surroundings had a bearing on their psychological formation. Fanon argues that "man's chronically neurotic state of mind cannot be alienated as long as the social economic structure that brought it on him remained unchanged" (120). Marder's assertion becomes a confirmation that because traumatic events often happen due to social forces as well

as in the social world, trauma has an inherently political, historical, and ethical dimension (1). Stevens concurs that trauma is figured as a cultural category which circulates among various social contexts that give it differing meanings and co-produce its multiple social effects (1).

It is instructive to note however, that the incidence of wound primarily does not elicit a lasting impression initially on the individual but a subsequent wounding that informs an undying pain which usually manifest through a voice – a voice that is out to tell the truth. (Freud, 31-32). Narrating traumatic incidents through a voice depicts the fact that a storyline is inextricably bound with trauma. Therefore, according to many researches on the application of trauma to literature, it becomes conspicuous that literature serves as the best intermediary of trauma representation than history or any other discipline that relates factual happenings only. Literary texts go beyond facts presentation like History, to recreate artistically experiences of trauma. These texts reveal the entire scenario of making the unknown known, which is exposing the hidden fragments, capturing the belatedness that characterizes a wound as well as the incomprehensibility that figures trauma.

Therefore, for the purpose of this study, the string of trauma theory employed is the one advanced by Cathy Caruth. This is because not just that Caruth's conception of trauma had basis on the works of Sigmund Freud which considered hysterical women and the Second World War neurosis victims but her theory also employs the survivors of wars as case studies. Moreover, Caruth describes trauma as the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomenon (91). This explanation encapsulates the experiences of the battlefield survivors whose cases Caruth studied. This also captures the experiences of the characters in the novel understudy. Apparently, it logically follows that this work which explores the implication of trauma in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) should adopt the theoretical framework advanced by Caruth since both have war victims as their common case studies.

## **A METAPHORICAL READING OF KAINENE'S LOSS IN THE NIGERIAN CIVIL WAR**

Kainene's disappearance in *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) demonstrates the compelling exemplification of the wound inflicted on the Igbos by the Biafran/Nigerian war. It conveys the unsettled trauma, identity fragmentation and the botched promise of unity and nationhood, underlining the apprehensions between Igbo identity and Nigerian citizenship even in contemporary times. The novel also symbolizes Kainene's disappearance not only as a replication of the disintegration of Igbo identity, which has been enmeshed in the struggle to maintain their cultural heritage, but also the systemic marginalization and violence. For Uko (2008, p.54):

In symbolic terms, prior to the Nigerian civil war, the people of the Eastern region, in particular the Igbo, felt marginalized and relegated in the national polity. That the state of Biafran was declared was a manifestation of their lack of a sense of belonging on the one hand, and a climax of their feeling of dissatisfaction, on the other.

Before delving into the traumatic proportions and their effects in the novel, it is significant to establish Kainene's disappearance not only as an individual catastrophe but also as a national tragedy. Adichie's portrayal of Kainene's personal traits such as innovation, resilience, doggedness, hard work, risk taking, entrepreneurial spirit etc., underscores the micro reflection

of the socio-cultural and economic identities through which the Igbos are known for. Interestingly, this could have informed Abayomi's (2017:6) representation of Kainene as "the epitome of a Biafran undying spirit. Though vanished, she remains ever present in the minds of her people and admirers." Kainene's characterization in the novel delineates her as a creative, resourceful and strong willed person. Instances abound in the novel how she ingeniously unveils such traits in challenging moments of trauma, pain, sorrow and uncertainties. However, her responses to traumatic occurrences in the narrative will be examined first, before verifying how her personal traits foregrounded her character as an emblematic open wound of the Igbos.

Kainene's traumatic itinerary begins after the gruesome murder of her uncle and the members of his household. Through Kainene's traumatic memory, one is able to see the after effects through the description given by Richard. Having wept before Olanna and her parents when she learnt of the death of uncle Mbazei, Aunty Ifeka and Arize, she goes home only to be affected by the continued remembrance of that brutal news. According to Richard, Kainene shows signs of withdrawal typical of traumatized patients:

Her aura of distance had returned since she came back from visiting Olanna in Nsukka. She had put up a photograph of her murdered relatives- Arize laughing in her wedding dress, Uncle Mbazei ebullient in a tight suit next to a solemn Aunty Ifeka in a print wrapper- but she said little about them... *she often withdrew into silence in the middle of a conversation.* (Emphasis mine, p.167)

Kainene's trauma at this point is double faced. Earlier on her twin sister, Olanna had terribly wounded her psychologically by having sex with her boyfriend, Richard. She is still keeping a distance at Richard when the horrible death of her relatives happened. So, with these incidences her behaviour changes "she resumes her distance and often withdraws into silence in a middle of a conversation". These are features of a traumatized mind. Krystal describes this as "survivors living in withdrawn depression" (77). In a similar occurrence during the fall of Port Harcourt, Ikejide one of Kainene's servants is hit by shrapnel and dies horribly:

A piece of shrapnel, the size of a fist, wheezed past. Ikejide was still running and, in the moment that Richard glanced away and back, Ikejide's head was gone. The body was running, arched slightly forwards, arms flying around, but there was no head. There was a bloodied neck. Kainene screamed. (317)

Kainene becomes shocked and momentarily dazed. Richard refuses to look at the headless body as Harrison buries the body and the separated head. Kainene watches forlornly sitting on the bare ground:

Are you all right? Richard asked her. She did not respond. There was an eerie blankness in her eyes. Richard was not sure of what to do. He shook her gently but the blank look remained, so he went to the tap and splashed a bucket of cold water on her. (317)

It is only a traumatized psyche that could react the way Kainene did during the gruesome but sudden death of Ikejide, who a moment ago was bustling with energy and life. It is surprising that that Kainene admitted that she "never really noticed" Ikejide. But, his death really devastates her terribly. Later after they have reached Orlu, Kainene reminds Richard about Olanna seeing a mother carrying her child's head. Her memory has started haunting her by

reenacting a similar incidence. She has really come to identify with mourning and trauma like Olanna. Her memory continues to haunt her:

How could shrapnel cut off Ikejide's head so completely? Kainene asked, as if she wanted him to tell her that she was mistaken about the whole thing. He wished he could. At nights, she cried. She told him she wanted to dream of Ikejide but she woke up every morning and remembered his running headless body clearly while, in the safer blurred territory of her dreams, she saw herself smoking a cigarette in an elegant gold holder. (318)

Richard's observation about Kainene's trauma is quite revealing "she often withdrew into silence in the middle of a conversation, and when she did he let her be; *sometimes he envied her for her ability to be changed by what had happened.* (Emphasis mine, 167). The italicized statement suggests the ability of trauma to change one's disposition. Moreover, these traumatic confrontations seemed to have reinforced Kainene's resilience as she wades through the grueling times of the war making her personal traits becoming expressively identifiable. Earlier in the novel, Kainene's entrepreneurial demeanor is clearly established as she handled some of her father's businesses:

So Kainene will manage the cement factory?' Chief Okonji asked, turning to her father. She'll oversee everything in the east, the factories and our new oil interests. She has always had an excellent eye for business. (31)

Having recognized her managerial competence in business, Kainene consistently carried out these tasks effectively within her capacity even in war times. In fact, it was during the war that her ability for innovation, risk taking and resourcefulness were made manifest. What she learnt from her father's diverse businesses helped her to stand out during the war. Her innovative approach to problem-solving clearly shows as she birthed the idea of opening and running a relief organization. "Things were normal until Port Harcourt fell. I was an army contractor, and I had a license to import stockfish. I'm in Orlu now. I'm in charge of refugee camp there" (343). Additionally, she combines the management of the refugee camp with other activities that complement her efforts in ameliorating the sufferings of people during the war.

"Kainene launched a Plant Our Own Food movement, and when she joined the men and women and children in making ridges, Olanna wondered where she had learned to hold a hoe." (389)

Olanna's skepticism about her twin's farming abilities accentuates Kainene's skill of improvising and adapting quickly to challenges especially as the war progressed. In fact, Olanna keeps wondering at Kainene's entrepreneurial spirit fuelled by her confidence. "Olanna watched Kainene speak. She did not hear much of what she said, because she was thinking of how unrelenting Kainene's confidence was" (347). Kainene's ability to navigate her diverse visions during the war with equanimity not only reveals her courage but also her commitment to the cause of Biafra. As the war degenerates with its attendant implications of hunger, disease and death, Kainene, in alignment with her entrepreneurial spirit, delves into the risk-taking venture of "Afia attack" where individuals cross to the enemies' border to buy and sell. People detest this kind of business because of the inherent risks. Unfortunately, in one of her numerous engagements, Kainene embarks on the journey of "Afia attack" and never returns.

Therefore, reading Kainene's disappearance as a metaphor of open wound to the psyche of the Igbos in contemporary Nigeria simply compares Kainene's personal qualities to that of the

Igbos in general. This recalls Abayomi's (2017:8) argument, "that she (Kainene) is archetypally projected through what Carl Jung regards as the collective unconscious to symbolize the general loss of the Biafran people in the novel." Her innovation, resilience, doggedness, hard work, risk taking, entrepreneurial spirit in moments of emergency, challenges, and trauma reveal the natural abilities the Igbos are known for. And when Kainene disappears in the traumatic narrative during the war and never returns, metaphorically the Igbos seemed to have lost their socio-political and cultural identity in the post Biafran/Nigeria civil war. During the war, like Kainene, the Igbos entrepreneurial acumen came to limelight. Throughout the three years' war, the Igbos improvised greatly in almost every sphere of life in order to sustain themselves. They were able to refine petrol without refineries, produce *Ogbunigwe* – a weapon of mass destruction, and build an airport among others. Describing the manufacturing of *Ogbunigwe* in the novel, Ekwenugo narrates: "about what he and his colleagues were making: high-impact landmines called *Ogbunigwe*, brake fluid from coco-nut oil, car engines from scrap metal, armored cars, grenades" (198).

From the above narrative, it is clearly shown how the Igbos during the war were able to improvise technological necessities by making "brake fluid from coconut oil" "car engines from scrap metal" and "armored cars and grenades". Such ingenuity of a people becomes so conspicuous in a war riddled situation, reflecting the old adage that "necessity is the mother of invention". Years later, contemplating on the aftermath of the war, Malife (2009) boldly reveals that:

Today, Nnewi, for instance, is referred to as the Japan of Africa because of the people's genius in technology. This could have been part of the knowledge gained and utilized in the manufacture of *Ogbunigwe*. (106)

If Freud's (31-32) submission that the occurrence of wound largely does not stimulate a lasting imprint on the individual but a consequent wounding that establishes an endless agony which usually reveal through a voice – a voice that is out to tell the truth. Then, the invasion of war against the Igbos does not provoke a wound per se but the subsequent wounding in the demonstration of marginalization after the war has become an endless pain that has refused to be healed. The wound, however, has become a recurring decimal that queries the belongingness of the Igbos in Nigeria. In Uko's estimation (2008, 54):

It signifies the fact that even though the war in Nigeria has been over since 1970, and a 'no-victor-no vanquished' declaration was made to douse all nerves and tempers, Biafrans, the people from Eastern Nigeria, though still in Nigeria, neither fully belong nor are they independent and free to harness their resources for their own welfare.

Adopting a multifaceted nature, the diverse voices of agitation like the separatist groups of Ralph Uwazurike's Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), Nnamdi Kanu's Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and Simon Ekpa's Eastern Security Network (ESN), are only an expression of a wound whose cries reflect the truth that is yet to be confronted. Considering the avalanche agitations from former Biafran enclave, and the seemingly disinterestedness of the Nigerian government to these cries, the solution seems unattainable. The indifference of the federal government towards these agitations seems quite ambivalent. Citing Chinua Achebe, Okafor (2008, p.34) contemplates "the portrait of Nigeria/Biafra conflict as the ambivalent gaze of a mother on her unwanted child". Substantiating this claim further, he noted that:

Chinua Achebe has argued quite convincingly, one of the major issues that confront the real Nigeria is its ambivalent attitude towards the Igbo people. On the one hand, most of the other ethnic nationalities in Nigeria are envious of the spectacular advances made by the Igbo people in all fields of human endeavor and consequently, would love to get rid of them. On the other hand, the same ethnic groups want to preserve the territorial integrity of Nigeria; hence, they do not want the Igbo people to secede from Nigeria and become an independent state.

This “ambivalent gaze” has generated violent squabbles between the Nigerian government and the separatist groups especially in the south east states of Nigeria where many lives and properties have been lost. Proffering solutions to this continued imbroglio, Nwachukwu (2022) identifies the effectiveness of social justice in the peace building that will restore healing which:

Involves acts such as reparation or compensation for damage inflicted, restoration for past losses, moral and political restitution, social, economic and cultural restructuring, as well as sharing of power, responsibility and resources. Considering the nature of the grievances underlying the Biafran separatist struggle, the social-justice approach to peace building appears to be the most plausible way of addressing the problem.

## CONCLUSION

Kainene’s disappearance in *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) endures as a lingering exemplification for the unsettled ordeal of the Nigerian civil war; an ordeal that has continued even to the present day Nigeria navigating through the socio-cultural, economic and political realities of the Igbo ethnic group. Through her loss, Adichie depicts the silences, obliterations, ambivalences and paradoxes that distinguish the nation’s fight with its vicious past; a past which Udezo and Ajakor (2009: 230) succinctly recalled:

After the war the Gowon administration declared ‘No Victor’ No Vanquished’ concerning the war which was merely in principle not in practice. The aftermath of the war continues to be seen in the running of the nation. For instance, in the south east zone of the country which consists of five states where as other zones are made up of six states despite agitations from the zone something reasonable is yet to be done. There is a notion that some parts of the nation are marginalized which is attributed to the effects of Nigerian civil war.

The above reference to marginalization parallels Kainene’s unaccounted fate which confronts the narrative thrust toward closure, indicating the larger cultural and political denial that inhibits national healing. By leaving her fortune uncertain, Adichie constrains her audience to challenge the emotional and historical vacuums that endure long after the war ends. In doing so, the narrative transfigures individual loss into a compelling emblem of communal mourning, making Kainene a persistent “open wound” in the Igbo’s memory ambience.

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