

THE BEHEADED CHILD. TRAUMA AND RESILIENCE IN ADICHIE'S NOVELS**Daniela-Irina Darie, PhD Candidate, "Al. Ioan Cuza" University of Iași**

*Abstract: The image of war within the Nigerian space erupts with a tremendous potential of dehumanizing. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie reveals the horrors and the consequences of watching those horrors from a psychological perspective which defines a particular worldview, a proposal for understanding not the reasons underlying an act, but the reasons for the inability to react. When the society collapses, the human being tries to adapt or perish. In Adichie's novels *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) and *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), the rules of the game called everyday life have been altered and the characters react in extra-ordinary ways. Adichie's characters are incapable of interiorizing the atrocities and as a result, they cease to define themselves as products of normality, mediate on a crossway between acting toward rebellion or toward assimilation and transformation. Adichie is the voice of the wound inflicted by the Biafran war, a battle asserting the tragedy of believing in balance and the right to intimacy. The trauma of war, a shattering experience in itself, escalates in social illness, when inflicted by African on African. Nigerians gained their independence, but the futility of such a lesson in history is once again proven to be the only stable assertion. Adichie's narrative enterprise is distressing, not by insisting on the substance of horror, but by describing it minutely, with a rationality that belies the grotesque of the images darkening her writing. In *Purple Hibiscus* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Adichie analyses African culture-related behaviors and artifacts as witnesses of the traumatic history of African wars, stressing the silence and the distorted voicing of a freedom lost to its own meaning. The representation of war in Adichie's novels is in itself a testimony of desolation and meaninglessness, and its reverberations in modern African literature are signifiers for a profound social guilt.*

Keywords: Biafran war, trauma, politics, African symbol, Igbo heritage

War is a recurrence which tends to learn nothing from history. Traumatizing, deforming, picturing grotesque and painful images in the eye of the innocent, it leaves its imprint in the very core of our being. But after the blood was shed, after the song was screamed, after the tears were restrained unto forgiveness, humankind must move on. And this is, in short, the message one of the representatives of the third wave of African writers challenges us with. "I was born seven years after the Nigeria-Biafra war ended, and yet the war is not mere history to me, it is also memory, for I grew up in the shadow of Biafra. I knew vaguely about the war as a child – that my grandfathers had died, that my parents had lost everything they owned. [...] I was aware of how this war haunted my family, how it colored the paths our lives had taken."¹ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie writes about experiences which have been transformed, in time, in oral history. And oral history, oral tradition, oral literary creation are all signifiers of a worldview which remain at the core of the African creative reign. *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Purple Hibiscus* are both attempts at shaping

¹ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *African „Authenticity” and the Biafran Experience*, *Transition*, No. 99 (2008), pp. 42-53, published by Indiana University Press, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20204260>>.

significance, through striking symbols in which the body and the lack of voicing become symptoms of an incomprehensible experience.

Half of a Yellow Sun belongs to the genre of contemporary trauma fiction not only because it focuses on the experience of a historical event, the Biafran war (the Nigerian Civil War), but because of its characters' psychological collapse against the "death and starvation of a million or more Nigerians."² Whereas Igbo writers strived to redeem the Biafra War as a cry for liberty, or as a cruel absurdity, nonetheless necessary for the creation of the new multicultural Nigerian state, Adichie refrains herself from reasoning with the atrocities of the beligerant darkness. She limits her writing to scenes and episodes harshly delineated, and from which the horror is allowed to speak for itself, with a sometimes so profound voice, that history becomes a perpetuated nightmare, in which "the power of pen is substituted for the impotence of soldiers armed only with sticks engaged in fighting well-armed Nigerian troops."³

In *Ropes of Sand: Studies in Igbo History and Culture*, Adiele Afigbo⁴ highlighted the two-fold event of a foreign traumatic imposition on the autonomy of Igboland: in the late nineteenth century, with the British imperialism desecrating and misleading by "gunboat treaty" the densely-defined Igbo villages, and a second trauma, maybe more profound and lasting because it was driven by another African culture, Yoruba. Adiele refers to the Biafran war (1966-1967), a war of secession, a war of delineating two African world views within the boundaries of the same Nigerian space.

The heroes of *Half of a Yellow Sun* learn how to survive their traumas, how to redefine their "why" with reference to the newly-created state of being. We will attempt to follow Olanna and Kainene, the rich twins, Ugwu, the subordinate identified with his masters, and Richard, the writer, in Adichie's recourse to her ancestry of symbols invested with the macabre function of forbidding dark memories.

A core instrument in defining a traumatic experience sublimated in an artifact, as the subject of pain refuses to absolve itself of the guilt of testimony, the image of the calabash is "carved" by Adichie so detailed and flowing like a memory. The calabash becomes more of a symbol than of a historical representation, as the remembrance of their content will be, delineating the horrid memory of an ever-present past.

The woman with the calabash nudged her, then motioned to some other people close by.

"*Bianu*, come," she said. "Come and take a look."

She opened the calabash.

"Take a look," she said again.

Olanna looked into the bowl. She saw the little girl's head with the ashy-gray skin and the braided hair and rolled-back eyes and open mouth. She stared at it for a while before she looked away. Somebody screamed. The woman closed the calabash. "Do you know," she said, "it took me so long to plait this hair? She had such thick hair."⁵

² Amy Novak, *Who Speaks? Who listens?: The Problem of Address In Two Nigerian Trauma Novels*, *Studies in the Novel*, Vol. 40, No. 1/2, *Postcolonial Trauma Novels* (Spring-Summer 2008), pp. 31-51, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/29533858>>.

³ Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, *The Poetics of the War Novel*, *Comparative Literature Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Summer, 1983), pp. 203-216, published by Penn State University Press, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40246397>>.

⁴ Adiele Afigbo, *Ropes of Sand: Studies in Igbo History and Culture*, cited in Lily G. N. Mabura, *Breaking Gods: An African Postcolonial Gothic Reading of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's "Purple Hibiscus" and "Half of a Yellow Sun"*, *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (Spring, 2008), pp. 203-222. Published by: Indiana University Press, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20109568>>.

⁵ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, New York: Anchor Books, 2006, p. 111.

An object of tradition and communion, the calabash is also a coffin, a grotesque reliquary for the annulment of a potentiality. The (his)story of the beheaded child will perpetuate in Olanna's memory as an oral history, a history which will be documented in the evasive book of the novel's historian, Ugwu.

Olanna [...] tells him how the bloodstains on the woman's wrapper blended into the fabric to form a rusty mauve. She describes the carved designs on the woman's calabash, slanting lines crisscrossing each other, and she describes the child's head inside: scruffy braids falling across the dark-brown face, eyes completely white, eerily open, a mouth in a small surprised O.⁶

The "rusty mauve" of the shrine cries the desperation of a mother who is incapable of coping with losing her son. The braided hair, as a routinely loving gesture, tries to annihilate the act of killing, the disappearance of the innocent victim. The minuteness of Adichie's description translates a terror too alien to be interiorized. The "eyes completely white, eerily open" to a tragedy beyond the human comprehension witness individual and even collective acts of sociopathic climaxes. As Michael Harris Bond highlighted, "we are well conditioned to find the pain and distress of violence, along with their accompanying embodiments in coagulated blood, amputated limbs, emaciated frames, severed limbs, and death masks, abhorrent",⁷ but Adichie's mother is left without any countermeasure to her daughter's death, one of many. Ollana "thought about the plaited hair resting in the calabash. She visualized the mother braiding it, her fingers oiling it with pomade before dividing it into sections with a wooden comb."⁸ She thinks, she visualizes the past, the peaceful gestures of the other reality, before the trauma. Adichie subtly invites us to recourse in the self, and to an abandonment of the horrid paintings of war for the small moments cherished by a frightened psyche.

This horrible act of crime is far from being unique in the moral and social chaos of war. The German women, "who fled Hamburg with the charred bodies of their children stuffed in suitcases, the Rwandan women who pocketed tiny parts of their mauled babies",⁹ all of them were trying to cling to some dissolute hope that their children's death isn't yet written. Mothers preserve parts of their dead babies, braiding their hair as in the homely acts of peace before the war, care for the decaying bodies, because denying is the only rational way to cope. The image will haunt Olanna the entire journey through the perils of war. Motherhood refused to her will amount to a severed head which, in the end, could have been any child's head, including hers.

One way of surpassing the psychological strain of trauma is to invest it with forgiveness. A humanist intellectual in the world of horrors, Olanna tries to "behave decent," to understand and give meaning to the abhorrent background against which she performs. Before death, we are equal, we all sound like "the bleating of a goat." The most powerful man in the state, Sardauna, begs for life, "*Mmee-mmeemmee*, please don't kill me, *mnee-mnee-mnee!*," and in the sandstorm drawn in the distance of the living eyes, his hate remains with his bleating of forgiveness. Even if "the Sardauna was an evil man," as Aunty Ifeka perceived him, even if "he hated everybody who did not remove their shoes and bow to him," still, "they

⁶ *Idem*, p. 66.

⁷ Michael Harris Bond, *Culture and Collective Violence: How Good People, Usually Men, Do Bad Things*, in Boris Droždek, John P. Wilson (eds.), *Voices of Trauma. Treating Survivors Across Cultures*, New York: Springer Science and Business Media, LLC, 2007, p. 46.

⁸ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *op. cit.*, 2006, p. 111.

⁹ *Idem*, p. 66.

should not have killed him,”¹⁰ it is Olanna’s resolution. Life remains within God’s cognition and will, even in the chaotic Lagos, where “[...] the killings were organized,” where “[...] the Northerners picked out all the Igbo soldiers and took them away and shot them.”¹¹ Whatever mask would they wear, “the organized killings” remain “killings,” and Adichie denies them the potentiality of creating new orders or of establishing new states of equilibrium. For the Nigerian authoress, the scene of murder is so incomprehensible that it must be reduced, minimalized and grounded in obscure places of imagination, where only ants could live and die, because “they are killing us like ants. Did you hear what I said? Ants.”¹² The witnessing eyes have seen plenty, as Obiozo says: “I saw a whole family, a father and mother and three children, lying on the road to the motor park. Just lying there.”¹³ Vultures are feeding on the bodies “dumped outside the city walls,” and war means to acknowledge what the eyes see: “teachers hacked down in Zaria, a full Catholic church in Sokoto set on fire, a pregnant woman split open in Kano.”¹⁴

The reaction of the listener is denial. Denial and the surge of loneliness in the storm of wording the pointless atrocities. Death must be felt in the private space of the inner self, it must be altered to a meaning sustained by the reflective thinking of the rationale mind. As Adichie maintains, this is what war denies to its sufferers, the moment of intimacy with life itself. Adichie’s teenager, Ugwu, retreats, because it is too much, words are too heavy and bloody and their heralds are viciously reiterating them as a newly-bred litany of delusion.

(...) Ugwu no longer listened. *It started in Kano* rang in his head. He did not want to tidy the guest room and find bedsheets and warm the soup and make fresh *garri* for them. He wanted them to leave right away. Or, if they would not leave, he wanted them to shut their filthy mouths. He wanted the radio announcers to be silent too, but they were not. They repeated the news of the killings in Maiduguri until Ugwu wanted to throw the radio out of the window.¹⁵

In 1993, researchers in the psychopathology of trauma noted: “Humans in general have an inherent need to make sense out of and explain their experiences. This is especially true when they are experiencing suffering and illness. In the process of this quest for meaning, culturally shaped beliefs play a vital role in determining [...] a particular explanation.”¹⁶ From this perspective, Adichie translates the trauma of the Biafran war into a storytelling, a trauma which must be understood in terms of powerful, even resounding images, colors absolved by the blood in whose red they nourish the purple of the resilience. As such, African context, and specifically the Igbo culture, is permeated by a system of beliefs and traditions which, colliding and coalescing into the siege of the traumatic event, would transform it in the impetus of resilience. As Moodley and West underlined, “cultures provide many alternative pathways to healing and integration of extreme stress experiences which can be provided by [...] culture-specific rituals, conventional medical practices and community-based practices that offer forms of social and emotional support for the person suffering the adverse, maladaptive aspects of a trauma.”¹⁷

¹⁰ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *op. cit.*, 2006, p. 98.

¹¹ *Idem*, p. 103.

¹² *Idem*, p. 107.

¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *op. cit.*, 2006, p. 107.

¹⁶ M. Smith, M.K. Lin, R. Mendoza, *Non biological issues affecting psychopharmacology: Cultural Considerations*, cited in Boris Droždek, John. P. Wilson (eds.), *Voices of Trauma. Treating Survivors Across Cultures*, New York: Springer Science and Business Media, LLC, 2007, p. 396.

¹⁷ R. Moodley, W. West, *Integrating traditional practice into counseling and psychotherapy*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Productions, 2005.

The power of Adichie's writing resides in her appeal to visual markers and the interplay they invoke in their encounter with the frailty of human life. Olanna sees first the smoke, "rising like tall gray shadows," she "smells the scent of burning." On the "strange, unfamiliar street," she paused for a moment because of the flames "billowing from the roof, with grit and ash floating in the air."¹⁸ She sees the bodies, crumpled like rug dolls in the derision of the theatrical display, in the "ungainly twist," surrounded by the complex universe which used to be the brain of her uncle, now nothing more than "something creamy white oozed through the large gash on the back of [her uncle's] head."¹⁹ The cuts on Auntie Ifeka's naked body "were smaller, dotting her arms and legs like slightly parted red lips,"²⁰ and the red of the smile is substituted by the vivid lesions of a desecrated icon. The traumatic event remains incomprehensible, less it could be reshaped and imagined in the language of the living. The reaction is visceral, before being rational: "Olanna felt a watery queasiness in her bowels before the numbness spread over her and stopped at her feet."²¹

The dream-like quality of the scene is amplified by the smoke, within which the human shapes drift like "plumes of smoke", the curtain between acceptance and the refusal to comprehend the blood-stained grotesque of the axes and machetes the shapes instrument. The arms transform the obscurity in an artisanship of a monster's mind.

The crime is subject to the same necessity of explanation as the life itself, inasmuch they nourish themselves from the same questions and collide in the same lack of answers. The "why" and the rationality behind it remains at "God's mercy," as His was the will to kill entire families. And beyond Allah's will Olanna sees so many bodies, "like dolls made of cloth." Abdulmalik, the executioner of the whole family, is, and what an irony, Olanna's uncle's friend, once a "familiar" face, now the mask of the death trade. "It was Allah's will", he calls in Hausa. And Olanna discovers that the once friendly intimate, now a soldier, has become a killer-soldier, one motivated by a contorted religious belief that Igbo are mystically ordained to be Yoruba's victims. The bodies are merely obstacles which are not for "stepping aside," but for stepping over. A woman's headless body, becoming the elongation of the bodiless head of the child, two images forcefully brought together in an attempt of making sense of the meaninglessness.

"Allah does not allow this," Mohammed said. [...] "Allah will not forgive them. Allah will not forgive the people who have made them do this. Allah will *never* forgive this." They drove in a frenzied silence, past policemen in blood-splattered uniforms, past vultures perched by the roadside, past boys carrying looted radios.²²

God is the only one surpassing the trauma and able to retaliate against the perpetrators. Adichie proposes multiple ways for re-balancing the storytelling and the history making, because, among others, religion is a way of anchoring the mind to a sense of normality.

Another element of the traumatic process is experienced by Richard, and it is shame, shame at not feeling anything besides relief that his helplessness in protecting his friends remained undiscovered, selfish return to the guilt of being an outsider powerless against the cultural clash between two alien cultures. "He could not have saved Nnaemeka, but he should have *thought* about him first," he rationalizes his own too humanly boundaries, he knows that his perception of the present alters in a perception of a false image, one in which he ceases to

¹⁸ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *op. cit.*, 2006, p. 110.

¹⁹ *Ibidem.*

²⁰ *Ibidem.*

²¹ *Ibidem.*

²² Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *op. cit.*, 2006, p. 110.

be consumed by the other's death. "He stared at himself and wondered if it really had happened, if he really had seen men die, if the lingering smells from [...] bloodied human bodies were only in his imagination. But he knew it had certainly happened and he questioned it only because he willed himself to."²³

When Olanna describes the horrors seen and experienced in her escape toward home, she tries to purge her unbalanced mind by transferring the images into somebody else's memory. A slight movement of the fingers denies the fact of death, a chimera or the illusory investment of a frail "no" said to images too horrible to grasp. The bodies are "like a poorly wiped blackboard," they are objects left behind by the interpreters from a morality with an implausible title such as "Death is forever."

The fact that the traumatic event is periodically remembered, and the real or symbolic association with the event triggers a psychological re-activation of the memory,²⁴ headless, bodiless, limbless, this "less" signifying the loss of something, something that must be relived, until death comes so close that Adichie's characters themselves become "–less."

That night, she had the first Dark Swoop: A thick blanket descended from above and pressed itself over her face, firmly, while she struggled to breathe. Then, when it let go, freeing her to take in gulp after gulp of air, she saw burning owls at the window grinning and beckoning to her with charred feathers.²⁵

Adichie conjures up bleak colors, or darkness's shadows, creating a scene so obscure and pervaded by fears that dissolution becomes a solution and a preservation. The "Dark Swoop" is a suspended form of existence, from which the choice for life or for death stays both in the hands of the tormented, and in the hands of the tormentor, balancing on the same center, the remembrance, again and again. The Dark Swoop is a symptom, a result of their dissociation from the strenuous events, and impossible to express, less in an opaque silence, a silence within which any attempt at identifying the wording is futile, the experience is viscerally felt, so incongruous with the normal flow of human evolution, that possesses another language, one unknown to normality.

Olanna is initially incapable to recount her Dark Swoops, "she wanted to ask [Odenigbo, her husband] to stop being ridiculous, but her lips were heavy. Speaking was a labor. When her parents and Kainene visited, she did not say much; it was Odenigbo who told them what she had seen."²⁶

The reactions to abhorrent trauma reflect the same stillness invoked by Adichie in expressing the tragic past: Olanna's mother "collapsed; she simply began to slide down as if her bones had liquefied until she half lay, half sat on the floor", Kainene cries for the first time since she and Olanna were children.

In his attempt to bring solace to a grieving family, Richard wants to give meaning to his presence, to be "the magnanimous angel who brought the last hours of their son to them," in search of his own redemption. But the death of the son takes away any other significance, the people surrounding the grieving close circle are still shadows, alike shadows pursuing a tradition rendered meaningless by the loss, because Richard's visit is not defined by "the last

²³ *Idem*, p. 115.

²⁴ Ana Muntean, Anca Munteanu, *Violență, traumă, reziliență*, Iași: Polirom, 2011, p. 167.

²⁵ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *op.cit.*, 2006, p. 117.

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

hours of their son,” it is not a reality of consequence, it’s only an attempt at understanding the only reality that mattered: “their son was gone.”²⁷

Richard, like Olanna, conjures his demons, in purges in which he hopes “his memory would suppress itself, but instead everything took on a terrible transparency and he had only to close his eyes to see the freshly dead bodies on the floor of the airport and to recall the pitch of the screams.”²⁸ Madness appears to be the expression of a freedom, but the escape is denied by the lucid mind. A mind enough lucid to write “calm replies to Aunt Elizabeth’s frantic letters and tell her that he was fine and did not plan to return to England, to ask her to please stop sending flimsy air-mail editions of newspapers with articles about the Nigerian pogroms circled in pencil.”²⁹ The foreign press describes the atrocities of the Biafran war as a result of “ancient tribal hatreds,” portraying Nigerian people as a sum of violent tendencies, because “Nigerians were so naturally prone to violence that they even wrote about the necessity of it on their passenger lorries.”³⁰ Although the account presented by the *Observer* advances the hope in the survival of the Igbos, “there was a hollowness to all the accounts, an echo of unreality.”³¹

But trauma isn’t limited to blood, and fragments of the body, it finds expression in the uprooting of a social group which had interiorized a way of perceiving life as a philosophical debate, not as a struggle for survival, as an issue opened and closed around the rich tables, in normal houses, glamorous and civilized. The war affects people and places, all the same, and houses become as alien as the events destroying them. Such a house could only be part of a nightmare, and Adichie’s descriptions assimilate it with the war, its invasion of privacy, the disruption of the social fabric, the disruption of normality, because “there was nothing normal about the house. The thatch roof and cracked unpainted walls [...] the cavernous pit latrine in the outhouse with a rusting zinc sheet drawn across it to keep flies out.”³²

A sense of belonging to a community still circumscribes itself to the lens through which the new world, the world of trauma, is perceived. People, with different backgrounds, different worldviews, different ways of expressing the same commitment to the remembrance of the bloody shadows, join together in small gestures, in digging through the rubble to find a child who most surely is dead, in covering the body of a woman laid next to a burning car, “her clothes burned off, flecks of pink all over her blackened skin.”³³ As the “smoky smell of burning” brings tears in eyes and the evasion of the singular thinking, Okeoma and Master join the digging through the rubble, and in this, they “cope” with the strange and distorted reality surrounding them, investing at the social level, on which the resilience acquires one of its core dimensions: compassion enhancement, empathy and active selflessness towards the others.³⁴ A knock on the door “fills with relief”, maybe this time, they “would sit down and talk properly,”³⁵ would share thoughts and fears, would share an equilibrium so fearfully necessary within core of the annihilating turmoil of war. But war has the malevolent capacity of destroying sand castles in the bloody hues of the swollen eyes. “Edna came in crying, her eyes swollen red, to tell her that white people had bombed the black Baptist church in her hometown. Four little girls had died.”³⁶

²⁷ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *op.cit.*, 2006, p. 123.

²⁸ *Ibidem.*

²⁹ *Ibidem.*

³⁰ *Ibidem.*

³¹ *Ibidem.*

³² *Ibidem.*

³³ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *op.cit.*, 2006, p. 148.

³⁴ St. Joseph and P.A. Linley, *Growth following adversity: Theoretical perspectives and implications for clinical practices*, *Clinical Psychology Review*, No. 26, Elsevier, pp. 1041-1053, <www.science.direct.com>, cited in Ana Muntean, Anca Munteanu, *Violență, traumă, reziliență*, Iași: Polirom, 2011, p. 251.

³⁵ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *op. cit.*, 2006, p. 177.

³⁶ *Ibidem.*

Kainene, Olanna's sister, an intellectual resiliently anchored within the words of academic titles, witnesses the same leveling effect of the war trauma. Another beheading, and the same reaction, the mental blockade and the psychological diversion following it. The piece of shrapnel, wheezing by Kainene's embrace with Richard, takes away in a moment Ikejide's head. "The body was running, arched slightly forward, arms flying around, but there was no head. There was only a bloodied neck. Kainene screamed."³⁷ The burial is swift, like any burial in the novel, without words, only measured and precise gestures, meant to annihilate the memory of the act itself: "He came back with a raffia bag. Richard did not look as Harrison went over to pick up Ikejide's head and put it in the bag. Later, as he grasped the still-warm ankles and walked, with Harrison holding the wrists, to the shallow grave at the bottom of the orchard, he did not once look directly at it."³⁸

The silver-white signs of the planes in the air, the blood, the stillness, the shallow grave, the long minutes of amorphous silence, they all possess something unnatural, and Adichie amplifies this strange background which is viewed with "an eerie blankness" by Kainene's eyes. The slow motions, Kainene changing her dress, wet by water like blood, the "boom-boom-boom of mortars, the quickening rattle of gunshots"³⁹, wait for a resolution, for an interruption in the flow of time, one which should be able to reverse the emptiness in a meaning. "«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."⁴⁰ She is trying to erase the memory of the symbolic crime, the symptomatic denial reverberating in the darkness of the alien gesture. Kainene wants "to dream of Ikejide", of a living vibrant friend, "but she woke up every morning and remembered his running headless body clearly while, in the safer blurred territory of her dreams."⁴¹ She finds a way out of her "blurred" lifeless dreams, in observing the effects of the war around her. The "twenty people living in a space meant for one and about the little boys who played War and the women who nursed babies and the selfless Holy Ghost priests Father Marcel and Father Jude"⁴² bring about a "manic vibrancy," behind the "shadowed eyes," life circling the massacres in which Inatimi, member of the Biafran organization of Freedom Fighters, "had lost his entire family," and now returned to assure, through education, a kind of normality for the refugees. Where does Inatimi, a deeply traumatized Igbo, the power to push the game farther? In his God. And Inatimi's god "was Biafra. His was a fervent faith in the cause. «When I lost my whole family, every single one, it was as if I had been born all over again». [...] «I was a new person because I no longer had family to remind me of what I had been.»"⁴³

The terrifying images of the starving child, moving with small gestures "impossible if he had some flesh underneath the skin," of the "taut globes that were their bellies, [and] their buttocks and chests [...] collapsed into folds of rumpled skin," is morbidly contrasted with the fatness, the vibrancy and the livelihood of the flesh flies, reigning against the defeated and humiliated humanity. Igbo nation has become „the thick ugly odors of unwashed bodies and rotting flesh from the shallow graves behind the buildings," "flies (...) over the sores on children's bodies," "an ugly rash of reddened bites around their waists, like hives steeped in blood."⁴⁴

³⁷ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *op.cit.*, 2006, p. 226.

³⁸ *Ibidem.*

³⁹ *Ibidem.*

⁴⁰ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *op. cit.*, 2006, p. 227.

⁴¹ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *op.cit.*, 2006, p. 227.

⁴² *Ibidem.*

⁴³ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *op.cit.*, 2006, p. 228.

⁴⁴ *Idem.*, p. 274.

Death ceases to exhume meaning because it had become so repetitive, becoming a number in a tedious series, “one for the burial.”⁴⁵ The reaction to this overly exercised finitude must develop some buffering, a cushioning of rational thoughts and human intimacy, in which Kainene could “hate [the victims] for dying.” To hate death is to love life, and Adichie’s characters make a choice, to return to action, to return to the brutal reality, however grotesque and torturing it may be. They turn to community and interpersonal experiencing, as we see Olanna assuming the role of the provider for her child, fighting for a few grams of dried egg yolk, because her child is sick. She learns from the people “who all seemed used to standing and waiting for a rusted iron gate to be opened so they could go in and be given food donated by foreign strangers.”⁴⁶ In the beginning, “she felt discomfited. She felt as if she were doing something improper, unethical: expecting to get food in exchange for nothing.”⁴⁷ But the food was not for nothing, it was, as Adichie suggests, the price of their wounds, for their blood, for their dismemberment.

Another symptom of trauma is silence, the incapacity of wording the horrors, which go beyond the ordinary dictionary. Richard is incapable of writing about his war experience, but he stops because “the sentences [...] sounded just like the articles in the foreign press, as if these killings had not happened and, even if they had, as if they had not quite happened that way. The echo of unreality weighed each word down.”⁴⁸ Ugwu remains also silent about the traumatic events in which, as a combatant, this time, was forced to participate. By his silence, he distances himself from the collective rape in which he was part, but he feels the need to write down Olanna’s experience, as if this chronicle would redeem his own abhorrence, as if “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.”⁴⁹

The characters in *Half of a Yellow Sun* are endowed by their authoress with resilience, a resilience which comes “from a worldview that believed that «no condition is permanent in this world»,”⁵⁰ or from the detachment of the (white) chronicler, the objectivity of the observer, or the metamorphic capacity of the childhood.

The period covered by *Purple Hibiscus* is ambiguous, as a politically-charged period sometimes is, regardless the culture which it tries to destroy. The pre-military coup struggle of the Nigerian family is farther enhanced by the intellectual and strongly religious sense of development. The grey land of waiting “the thunder” accumulates a malign energy, marked by “(a) small crowd gathered around the vegetable stalls”, and triggered by “(the) soldiers (which) were milling around.”⁵¹

In *Purple Hibiscus*, Adichie presents another type of trauma, triggered by political violence, because, as Swiss and Giller (1993) underlined: “A core element of modern political violence is the creation of states of terror to penetrate the entire fabric of social relations, as well as subjective mental life, as a means of social control.”⁵²

Market women were shouting, and many had both hands placed on their heads, in the way that people do to show despair or shock. A woman lay in the dirt, wailing, tearing at her short afro. Her wrapper had come undone and her white underwear showed. [...] As we

⁴⁵ *Idem*, p. 247.

⁴⁶ *Idem*, p. 195.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁸ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *op.cit.*, 2006, p. 124.

⁴⁹ *Idem*, p. 286.

⁵⁰ Christie Achebe, *Igbo Women in the Nigerian-Biafran War 1967-1970: An Interplay of Control*, *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 5 (May 2010), pp. 785-811, published by Sage Publications, Inc., <<http://www.jstor.org/40648606>>.

⁵¹ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus*, London: Harper Collins Books, 2012, p. 25.

⁵² Dora Black, Martin Newman, Jean Harris-Hendriks, Gillian Mezey (eds.), *Psychological Trauma. A Developmental Approach*, London: Gaskell, Royal College of Psychiatrists, 1997, p. 148.

hurried past, I saw a woman spit at a soldier, I saw the soldier raise a whip in the air. The whip was long. It curled in the air before it landed on the woman's shoulder.⁵³

The voice of violence is, again, an overwhelming presence, and women's abuse by soldiers is vengeful, petty and illogical. Both "combatant" parties seem equally dangerous, and the image a child must not see is the image of a trauma a child must not feel. The whip signifies both the physical trauma, and the lashes of the politically strained background. Liberty is a luxury denied in times of social censorship, newspapers are an enemy that must be silenced, and the images perceived "reminded them of pictures from the front during the civil war."⁵⁴ The boarding of the publishing house is a killing without a victim, but nonetheless it calls out for the victims still to fall. In the next edition of the *Standard*, the detailed story relates that "soldiers shot Nwankiti Ogechi in a bush in Minna. And then they poured acid on his body to melt his flesh off his bones, to kill him even when he was already dead."⁵⁵ The "men wearing black masks" herald crime as a political interplay, and this time, Adichie proposes a trauma that must be remembered: "Remember the bomb blast at the airport when a civil rights lawyer was traveling. Remember the one at the stadium during the pro-democracy meeting. Lock your doors. Remember the man shot in his bedroom by men wearing black masks."⁵⁶

The death of Ade Coker, blown to pieces by a bomb delivered when he was at breakfast with his family, states the installment of terror. The grotesque of "Ade Coker's charred remains spattered on his dining table, on his daughter's school uniform, on his baby's cereal bowl, on his plate of eggs"⁵⁷ haunts Kambili in her nightmarish dreams, and sometimes, Adichie's main protagonist becomes the daughter, and her father, becomes "the charred remains." The traumatic event takes place in the same bleak, almost colorless backdrop as *Half of a Yellow Sun*, and Adichie reiterates the Nigerian trauma, the beheaded children, the tortured and raped women, the babies too hungry to move, the houses resembling a mortuary, but her writing remains a proof "of Afigbo's argument that colonial rule and the Biafra War transformed Igbo society, but they «did not destroy Igbo identity or cultural soul»."⁵⁸ The resilience of Adichie's characters resides in their cultural identity, in their strong societal connections, and in their power to recuperate the vibrations of the past and transform them in the waves of the future.

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⁵³ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *op. cit.*, 2012, p. 25.

⁵⁴ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *op. cit.*, 2012, p. 74.

⁵⁵ *Idem*, p. 98.

⁵⁶ *Idem*, p. 99.

⁵⁷ *Idem*, p. 101.

⁵⁸ Lily G. N. Mabura, *Breaking Gods: An African Postcolonial Gothic Reading of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's "Purple Hibiscus" and "Half of a Yellow Sun," Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (Spring, 2008), pp. 203-222. Published by: Indiana University Press, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20109568>>, accessed: 10/11/2014 04:39.

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