

Writing Biafra: Adichie, Emecheta and the Dilemmas of Biafran War Fiction

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In an author's note at the end of *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie remarks that she could not have written the book without her parents, who "wanted [her] to know... that what is important is not what they went through [in the Biafran War] but that they survived" (434). It is an intriguing comment, sitting as it does beside Adichie's acknowledgment of more than thirty books that "helped in [her] research"—every one of them very much concerned with what Biafrans went through (434). The majority of them are histories or political studies, but the list also includes almost a dozen works of fiction: Chinua Achebe's *Girls at War and Other Stories* (1972), Flora Nwapa's *Never Again* (1975), Chukwuemeka Ike's *Sunset at Dawn* (1976), Cyprian Ekwensi's *Divided We Stand* (1980), Elechi Amadi's *Sunset in Biafra* (1982), Eddi Iroh's *The Siren in the Night* (1982), Kalu Okpi's *Biafra Testament* (1982), Ossie Enekwe's *Come Thunder* (1984), Nwapa's *Wives at War* (1984) and Anthonia Kalu's *Broken Lives and Other Stories* (2003). The juxtaposition of this list with the note about Adichie's parents acknowledges both the novel's debt to a literary tradition heavily invested in accounting for what happened in Biafra, and a desire to redirect that investment. So, it invites a re-reading of the novels Adichie lists, both to find out what *Half of a Yellow Sun* owes to them and what it adds to them. It is also an invitation to reflect on the fact that although Biafran War literature has, as an oeuvre, been deeply concerned with the problem of closure—a full and final accounting—the oeuvre itself continues to grow and evolve.

Adichie's list of Biafran War literature is not by any means a comprehensive bibliography; that would include more than thirty-five works of fiction and a dozen autobiographies.¹ However, it is a fairly representative collection, ranging in publication date from 1974 to 2003, and Adichie cannot be accused of being, in any problematic way, selective. It is a little surprising not to see Sebastian Mezu's *Behind the Rising Sun* listed, if only because it has the distinction of being the first Biafran War novel. But then it is widely acknowledged to be an "awkwardly constructed" (Griswold 229), "aesthetically tortuous"

¹ A very rough estimate. In 1990, Craig McLuckie calculated that twenty-nine literary works and ten autobiographies had been published on the civil war.

(McLuckie 92) “fictional disaster” (Nwahunanya, 435), so perhaps not much is lost by the omission. At first glance it might also seem odd that all of the novels Adichie cites are by Igbo writers. However, the fact is that Biafran War fiction has been a largely Igbo tradition.² It is clearly this Igbo tradition Adichie is acknowledging and responding to in *Half of a Yellow Sun*.

There are a few specific things that Adichie probably owes to her literary precursors. The experiences of Meka, a fifteen year old soldier in *Come Thunder*, might have inspired some details of Ugwu’s experiences in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. The British diplomat Alan Grey, in *Destination Biafra*, may have suggested Adichie’s Richard Churchill although, if that is the case, Adichie seems to have developed her complex portrait of an ex-pat in love with Africa in *contrast* to Emecheta’s flat stereotype of the British colonialist. Similarly, some details of Olanna’s and Ugwu’s experiences in *Half of a Yellow Sun* may owe something to Chukwuemeka Ike’s *Sunset at Dawn* and Flora Nwapa’s *Wives at War*. Olanna at one point grieves for the things left behind in Nsukka, “her tablecloths with the silver embroidery, her car” (262), a detail reminiscent of Emeka Ezenwa’s wife in *Sunset at Dawn*, a woman whose only concern is with her possessions abandoned in Nsukka. And in Nwapa’s “Daddy, Don’t Strike the Match” Ndidi Okeke restricts his fifteen year old son to their home because “[i]f he wandered about the village, he might be conscripted into the army” (19); this is precisely Ugwu’s situation in Umuahia. Further examples might be drawn from most of the fiction in Adichie’s bibliography, but cataloguing all of these minutiae would be tedious and, in the end, unenlightening.

More interesting are *Half of a Yellow Sun*’s less easily-defined literary debts. For example, although it is difficult to assess exactly how much *Half of a Yellow Sun* owes to *Destination Biafra*, the latter’s documentation of “portions of the war that other narratives only gloss or allude to” as Ann Marie Adams puts it (295)—particularly its depictions of rape—seems an important precedent. More broadly, I think, Emecheta’s attempt to “redress the gendered bias of discourse on the war” (Adams 288), can be seen as a source of inspiration for *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Adichie herself acknowledges a similar debt of inspiration to Ike’s *Sunset at Dawn* and Nwapa’s *Never Again*, which she calls “indispensable in creating the mood of middle-class Biafra” (434). More than that, the way Adichie juxtaposes the dramatic realities of living through a war with the quotidian, often tawdry realities of simply *living* seems to owe something to Ike and Nwapa, along with Anthonia Kalu’s “stories of ordinary people caught in the middle of events they [do] not fully understand” (xxii). This, I argue, is both one of *Half of a Yellow Sun*’s most significant points of contact with its antecedents and the point where

² Wendy Griswold estimates that three quarters of Biafran War novels are by Igbo authors (229). Wole Soyinka’s *Season of Anomy*, Saro-Wiwa’s *Sozaboy*, and Elechi Amadi’s *Estrangement* are probably the most significant non-Igbo contributions.

it begins to distinguish itself from them. That is, precisely because *Half of a Yellow Sun* dramatizes its own incompleteness, its inability to fully comprehend (in both senses of the word) the Biafran War, it negotiates the dilemmas implicit in fictionalizing war more successfully than most of its predecessors.

As Chidi Amuta puts it, “although the raw, immediate experience of horror does lend itself to journalistic reflection, the literary enterprise requires fictional mediation of social experience” (89). Some of the books I will discuss here fail as “literary enterprises” in this respect, being, as Amuta says, little more than “thinly disguised and pedestrian reflections of history” (90). Some fail because they lose touch with the “immediate experience,” and some fail because they cannot reconcile the contradictory demands being made of them. That is, they all seem to be striving for what Eddie Iroh calls “an unbiased, total assessment of the whole great tragedy” (Hawley 18). But Iroh’s formulation makes certain rather contradictory assumptions about what will be entailed in a successful representation of the war. First, what he calls for is objective distance, the statement of bald facts and second, “assessment,” judgement passed on the facts and, by implication at least, on the participants in the war. It is also important that this be a “total” assessment; that is, no detail should be left out and no crime left unexposed, the original matter captured whole. Third—and this is where the complications arise—he calls for an affirmation that Biafra was, in fact, a “great tragedy.” That is, while Iroh asks that an account of Biafra be shaped by the objective presentation of facts, he also asks that Biafra be made *meaningful* by its re-presentation as tragedy. On one hand the account must be left whole, while on the other it must be sculpted.

This is, of course, a problem that all historical fiction confronts: how to reconcile or at least balance the competing demands of historicism and storytelling. To his credit, it is not a problem that Iroh claims to have solved himself, except in the most tentative way. In the author’s note to *The Siren in the Night*, he says, “Where actual events have been recalled, I have tried to do so without altering the sequence or content of such events. But for the benefit of the purist, the creation of the post of Deputy Chief of Army... is more a matter of licence than fact” (n.p.). In fact, what the creation of a Deputy Chief of the Army, “an inept leader,” gives Iroh license to do is transfer all assessments of incompetence, which in an historical account would attach to specific figures on both sides of the conflict, to a surrogate (a “deputy”). Similarly, “Mad Mike” Kolawole, a Nigerian officer whose “classic mindless savagery elevate[s] him swiftly from captain to full Colonel in less than three years,” gives Iroh a fictional substitute for all of the very real monsters who emerged during the Biafran war. This substitute then becomes the central figure in a fantasy of cosmic justice in which the “battlefield sadists,” who “literally machine-gunned their way into the history books” (40), eventually get what they deserve: Mike Kolawole is blown to pieces.

In *Siren in the Night* this strategy works because Iroh is quite careful about distinguishing between the fictional characters, over whose lives he

has authorial control (and of whom he can therefore give a “total assessment”), and the real figures who belong to “the history books” and who remain beyond his grasp. Both Gowon and Ojukwu, for example, are mentioned in the book, but they are merely points of reference, marginal notes, not part of the fiction. By contrast, it is precisely because Buchi Emecheta, in *Destination Biafra*, does not maintain this distinction between fictional and historical figures that her narrative runs into problems. In the “Author’s Foreword” Emecheta says, “[N]o character in this book is intended to represent any actual person,” (ix) but this turns out to be a thoroughly dishonest disclaimer. For example, the character Ozimba, an Igbo politician who in 1966 has “been at the game of Nigerian politics for almost thirty years” is transparently Nnamdi Azikiwe (38). He is even “enthusiastically acknowledged with the shortened form of his name, ‘Zimmm!’” (38), a detail clearly intended to recall the popular rendering of “Azikiwe” as “Ze-ee-eeek” (Soyinka, *Set Forth* 55). Similarly, Emecheta’s characters Onyemere, Momoh and Abosi are unambiguously Ironsi, Gowon and Ojukwu. These semi-fictional characters, and several others like them, give Emecheta considerably more “licence” than the Deputy Chief of the Army gives Iroh. They allow her, for example, to imagine the conversation between young army officers that led to the coup in April 1966, a conversation of which there is, for obvious reasons, no actual record. The dangers implicit in this sort of literary strategy become clear in Ann Marie Adams’ reading of the scene:

Emecheta is clear to note that the military officials, before they perpetrated their infamous coup, dreamed of a nation free from the troubles currently plaguing their land, a nation free from Western encroachment — in other words, of Biafra.(292)

So, despite Emecheta’s disingenuous caveat that “no character . . . is meant to represent any actual person”, a fictional conversation between “fictional” characters is read as evidence of the real motives of historical figures. One might argue that this is a fault in the reader, not in the text, but that would be excusing the text of its very real confusion.

It is a confusion that comes from the collision between two competing and incompatible impulses. On one hand *Destination Biafra* has a strong allegorical impulse. For example, neither Abosi nor Momoh (the leaders of Biafra and Nigeria respectively) are able to have children. The former’s wife has repeated miscarriages, and the latter’s gives birth to a stillborn “monstrosity” (193). Ann Marie Adams explains, “In each case, the death of a child signifies that a new nation cannot be born: Biafra is an abortive effort and the ‘new’ Nigeria, without its seceded peoples and under an abusive military regime, is ‘monstrous’ and incomplete” (292). Virtually every character in the novel is constructed in this heavy allegorical fashion. Even Debbie, the principal character (and the narrator’s focalizer) is clearly meant to be an allegory of an independent and detribalized Nigeria. This allegorizing takes its bluntest form, however, in the creation of an orphaned baby named Biafra, whom Debbie

ends up carrying. The baby inevitably dies; and, as if Emecheta is afraid that readers will miss the point, one of Debbie's travelling companions says, "I think the death of this child is symbolic. This is how our Biafra is going to fall" (202). In fact, the fear that her audience won't get the point seems to be the main reason for Emecheta's recourse to allegory. It does make things simpler.

There are, of course, immediate dangers in the kinds of simplifications allegory requires. For example, Debbie's role as detribalized Nigeria rests on the fact that she is "neither Igbo nor Yoruba nor Hausa" but one of the minority groups, which makes her, Emecheta says, "simply a Nigerian" (vii). It is a useful simplification, but it has the unfortunate effect of obliterating minority ethnic identities. In fact, the Ogoni, the Ijaw, the Ikwere and all the other small ethnic groups in the Niger Delta suffered attacks from *both* sides in the Biafran War precisely because of their minority ethnic identities. This is a piece of history that *Destination Biafra* tries to erase, recalling only:

The Igbo leaders could hardly restrain the joy and celebration of the people of Eastern Nigeria when the state of Biafra was declared on 30 May, three days after the news from Lagos about the division of the country. (99)

The reality was more complicated. When the Nigerian government announced plans to re-divide the country into ethnically-based states, giving many of the minority groups in Eastern Nigeria their own areas, the move was welcomed by the minorities as enthusiastically as it was derided by the majority Igbos. As Emecheta recalls it in *Destination Biafra*, "the richest oil wells in the East fell into the hands of the non-Igbo-speaking people. In other words [Momoh] declared war against Abosi and his people" (115). The minority groups immediately came under suspicion of being sympathetic to Western and Northern Nigeria and of wanting to sabotage Biafra (Emecheta's unself-conscious use of the phrase "fell into the hands of the non-Igbo" reflects that this suspicion lingered even ten years after the war). Elechi Amadi, an Ikwere, remembers:

At this time [leading up to independence] demonstrations were a way of life . . . In the villages, tom-toms were used to alert the people. Reluctant village heads in the minority areas learnt to co-operate after a few rough nights in the detention camps. Anyone who did not turn up for demonstrations faced the grim possibility of being branded a "sabo" [saboteur]. (38)

The erasure of the ethnically based state divisions in the newly-declared Biafra was a source of considerable apprehension amongst minorities and, as Amadi recalls, independence from Nigeria did not produce quite the uniform "joy and celebration" that Emecheta imagines. Amadi describes the day of independence: "for a moment I was stunned with dismay, but remembering that security men were probably watching all around I raised my hand and shouted with the mob 'Biafra! Biafra!' It was a mad time" (38). *Destination Biafra*, in which the minority group member Debbie can be "simply a Nigerian," erases these complexities. This may, however,

have seemed to Emecheta a fair exchange for clarity. Her intended audience in *Destination Biafra* is European and American: the first chapter begins with a discussion between the Governor of Nigeria and his replacement that would be tedious stuff for a Nigerian reader but which functions as a primer for the outsider. This is not the first time Emecheta had attempted to address this audience about the Biafran war. As a student in London during the war she had demonstrated in Trafalgar square along with thousands of other Nigerians (vii), but the British public and their government had failed (or refused) to understand. *Destination Biafra* becomes Emecheta's opportunity to penetrate the British public's wilful incomprehension, and it is not an opportunity she is inclined to waste on ambiguity or uncertainty. Hence the recourse to pointed allegory.

A desire for clarity also seems to motivate the second, contradictory impulse in *Destination Biafra*. There are moments in the novel that insist on their straightforward referentiality. I have already quoted, for example, the description of independence celebrations. The tone is documentary, and designed to impress upon the reader its neutral factuality. But this desire to connect the text straightforwardly to its historical referents—to say “this actually happened”—is deeply at odds with its allegorical nature, and leads to confusion. Ann Marie Adams, after discussing *Destination Biafra*'s critique of belligerent Nigerian male chauvinism, speculates, “What if women such as Debbie had fully been allowed into the army before the disastrous coups on more than a tokenary basis? What if the ‘revolution’ [of Biafran independence] had incorporated gender reform?” (293). But there is an impossible slippage here between allegory and reality: what would it mean for a “woman such as Debbie,” an allegory of “Mother Africa” in Adams's critique (296), to join the Nigerian army?

Destination Biafra reflects particularly clearly the problems implicit in Eddie Iroh's call for “an unbiased, total assessment of the whole great tragedy” of Biafra. However, all of *Half of a Yellow Sun*'s antecedents suffer from the same problems to a greater or less extent. Cyprian Ekwensi's *Divided We Stand*, for example, makes the same kind of factual claims as *Destination Biafra*—an introductory note remarks, “Though a work of fiction, many who were witnesses will testify that *Divided We Stand* reflects with verisimilitude the crises years” (vi). But it also comprises many of the same inventions and elisions as Emecheta's book. Like *Destination Biafra* it imagines a conversation between the conspirators in the April 1966 coup which explains and legitimizes their removal of an “unpopular and tyrannical Government” (36). And like *Destination Biafra* it elides the attacks on non-Igbos in Biafra. That whole part of the historical record is dealt with in one disingenuous line: “All the non-Eastern people . . . left for home” (138). Of course, all historical fiction takes these kinds of liberties. As Chinyere Nwahunanya says in his article on the aesthetics of Biafran war fiction, there is always a negotiation between historicism and “imaginative creation” (428). However, in instances where there is something at stake in the history—and forty years later this is still the case with the history of Biafra—there

is going to be anxiety about the slippage between fictionalization and falsification.

This, I think, is partly what prompts John Hawley, in a recent article, to make the oddly new-critical argument that Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation* is "the best Biafran war novel to date" because it "rais[es] the war above the specifics of the historical setting . . . implicitly comparing it to wars that have passed and that are ongoing" (22). This is, of course, a venerable argument—that what is to be valued in art is its universality rather than its historical or cultural specificity. It is also an argument that one treats with some suspicion in a postcolonial context. However, the more immediate problem with Hawley's argument is that *Beasts of No Nation* is not a Biafran war novel at all. The inclusion of a character nicknamed "Rambo" sets the novel after 1982, and the geographical detail that the government is in the North (41), while not suggesting any specific county, does rule out Nigeria.³ Neither of these things on their own is particularly important; they do not mean that *Beasts of No Nation* cannot be in part, or even principally, about the Biafran war. However, the last chapter of the novel finds the narrator, the child soldier Agu, in a rehabilitation camp, something that veterans of the Biafran war certainly did not have access to. This is much more important. If *Beasts of No Nation* were, in any direct way, about the Biafran war, this detail would be a contentious falsification. But it is not necessary to lumber the novel with this problem. Hawley has the novel's relationship to the Biafra war backwards. It is not a novel about Biafra that speaks implicitly about other wars; it is a novel about African wars in the 80s and 90s that speaks implicitly about Biafra.

Half of a Yellow Sun, by contrast, is unmistakably about the Biafran War. Hawley qualifies this with the observation that "Adichie portray[s] the war as a backdrop for interpersonal ethical questions" (15). But the qualification is not quite right. The term "backdrop" implies the static irrelevancy of stage scenery, and I do not think *Half of a Yellow Sun* can be said to treat the Biafran War this way. Certainly there are Biafran war novels in which the war does function merely as stage scenery. Chinyere Nwanunhanya criticizes a scene in Mezu's *Behind the Rising Sun* for exactly this reason; the scene is set in Owerri but "change Owerri to Florida or New York, and this melodramatic scene could well have come from a James Bond film or a Hadley Chase novel" (433). A similar criticism can be made of Kalu Okpi's *Biafra Testament*; the bulk of it reads like a third-rate action adventure that could be transferred to virtually any colourful setting:

Just then, Malu finally freed the .38. He thumbed back the hammer and started crawling painfully towards the wall. A prolonged burst of automatic fire rent the night anew. Out of the corner of his eye, Malu saw the soldier beside Corporal Ide double up and hit the gravel with a sickening crunch. The corporal himself was obviously hit

³ Iweala himself has said: "the setting is not Nigeria, nor are my characters from any of Nigeria's numerous ethnicities" (12), but in some ways this is less compelling than the text's own evidence.

also, but with his final dying strength, he picked up one of the automatics and blasted the policeman who had fired at them. The man screamed, clutched his stomach and toppled over. Corporal Ide shook violently as more bullets tore into his body. Slowly, he sagged down onto the gravel path, with his finger still on the trigger. (88)

It is a scene that owes almost everything to pulp fiction and Hollywood B-movies, and almost nothing to the history of Biafra.⁴ Consequently, although Okpi sets out to testify about the Biafran War, so that Nigerians will be moved “never to let it happen again” (n.p.), most of the book says nothing about Biafra at all. In other words, if Emecheta’s *Destination Biafra* runs into trouble by trying to yoke two incompatible genres—allegory and documentary—*Biafra Testament* runs into trouble by choosing a genre, the “war thriller,” which is virtually incapable of saying anything about the real world because its characters do not, in fact, interact with the real world.

The characters in *Half of a Yellow Sun* do interact with the real world, or at any rate with the novel’s persuasively and fully realized representation of the real world. What makes that representation persuasive is its human scale. For example, we learn only as much about Nigerian air raids on Umuahia (or the uses of traditional magic in modern Nigeria, or the starvation caused by Nigeria’s blockade of Biafra) as we can by observing characters experiencing them. Rarely does Adichie resort to contextualizing historical exposition. This is in sharp contrast to Emecheta’s approach in *Destination Biafra*. Emecheta sketches in the historical and political context of an event, for example the massacre of Igbo fleeing Northern Nigeria after Biafran independence, and then stages a scene to illustrate that event. The scene is then capped with an observation: “Over two thousand Igbo men died along the Benin-Asaba road on ‘Operation Mosquito.’ But, as they say, that was war” (168). The effect of this approach is to make the individual characters in Emecheta’s story insignificant. What really matters are the horror of the statistics—“over two thousand Igbo men died”—and the machinery of national (and international) politics that caused those deaths.

Adichie’s approach to writing the Biafran war is much more like Flora Nwapa’s in *Never Again*. In that novel the war is perceived not from the privileged perspective of the international observer or even of the informed elite, but from the perspective of someone with little access to the “facts.” The narrator, Kate, like everyone else in the village of Ugwuta, has only rumour and propaganda to rely on. She tells her mother, “You and I don’t understand. All that is left now, is to keep alive. This is not the time to apportion blame. Let’s keep alive first” (29). The only “facts” that matter are those that effect survival on a daily basis: hunger,

⁴ Amuta identifies *Behind the Rising Sun* and *Biafra Testament* as part of a genre, “the war thriller” that became popular in Nigeria after the Biafran war. “The development of the Nigerian thriller in the war milieu,” he argues, “was a logical response to the intricacies of international conspiracy, interpersonal rivalries among the officer cadre, and the growing complexity of the state with its facility for secret operation” (92).

suspicion, fear. Adichie's characters find themselves in a similar position. The more the Biafran War becomes a moment in political history, the less important either politics or history become to Odenigbo, Olanna, Ugwu and the other Biafrans whose lives have been reduced to the permanent present of mere survival. Even the momentous event of Biafra's surrender signifies to Olanna, whose sister has disappeared behind enemy lines, only one thing: she can go and find her sister. That the superpowers have got their way, that the ideal of a free black state has been betrayed, and that the world did not listen do not matter. Only practical questions of survival matter. In the text, this moment of radically limited horizons is followed quite literally by a blank space. And then this: "A week passed. A Red Cross van arrived at the refugee camp and two women handed out cups of milk" (412).

Hawley argues that, because of her "comparative disinterest in the niceties of the war's politics," Adichie is "writing something 'less' than a Biafra novel" (21-22). I should point out that Hawley's assessment is purely quantitative, not qualitative. He acknowledges that the novel's "literary finesse is extraordinary," noting only that it falls short of satisfying Iroh's call for "an unbiased, total assessment of the whole great tragedy [of Biafra]". I do not think I can argue with this. As Hawley says, "Adichie's account is not the 'total' reckoning that Iroh envisions, and is not completely without some positioning in the conflict's politics" (23). However, I argue that perhaps Iroh is wrong about what is needed; wrong about what makes a "Biafran War novel." A "total reckoning" is probably not possible, and if it were it would certainly be undesirable. I say this for two reasons. The first is the one I have just outlined: a total reckoning demands a privileged, even omniscient perspective, one that inevitably loses the human scale of things. What is needed in war fiction, and Hawley recognizes this in the case of *Beast of No Nation*, is the limited, fragile human perspective. Only that can make it universal in a meaningful way.

The second reason to be wary of any "total reckoning" is that virtually all of the writers who have been motivated to attempt such a comprehensive documentation of Biafra's brief existence have felt compelled to include in that reckoning an assessment and apportionment of the blame for Biafra's futility and failure. One can see this tendency in almost all of the fictions Adichie cites. In *Divided We Stand* the principal causes of failure are "[t]he callousness and amorality of the world, the collusion of the Super Powers, the intransigence of Nigeria, the use of British arms to slaughter Biafrans, [and] the raids of Egyptian-piloted Russian planes on black Biafra" (208). *Destination Biafra* adds the corruption of male-dominated politics to this list. In Chukwuemeka Ike's *Sunset at Dawn*, by contrast, much of the blame seems to rest with women, who care more for their possessions than for Biafra (20) and who blame their husbands for doing their duty at the expense of their family (29). The real villains in *Sunset at Dawn*, however, are the things that women are seen as standing for: tribalism, family networks, nepotism—

the roots of corruption and civic failure in Nigeria. Flora Nwapa identifies the process of blaming itself as part of the problem (*Never Again*, 62), but also identifies a list of villains that includes “deserters,” “saboteurs,” “white mercenaries” and “overzealous leaders” (“A Certain Death” 39). Ossie Enekwe’s *Come Thunder*, written from the perspective of a young Biafran soldier, blames the senior officers who betrayed their men. In fact, the failure of leadership on all levels is a recurring theme in these war fictions, as it is in non-fiction accounts of the war: Adichie cites Elechi Amadi’s *Sunset in Biafra* and Wole Soyinka’s *The Man Died*, for example, both of which critique the “colossal moral failure” that led to the war (Soyinka 20).

This apportionment of blame is understandable and, perhaps, for those who lived through the war, unavoidable. Ironically, however, one of the effects of this process on the fictions that contain them is to undermine them as representations of the experience of living through the war. As Kate says in *Never Again*, wartime is “not the time to apportion blame.” Blame comes later, when it’s all over. And, in the case of *Never Again*, this is precisely what happens. Nwapa, writing after the fact, can’t help interpolating hindsight into the narrative, and this has two effects. First, as Chidi Amuta observes, “the frequent sermonizing of the narrator tends to dull the momentum of the narrative” (Amuta 129). Second, it places the telling of the story in that “later, when it’s all over” when “blame comes.” In other words, the passing of judgement in *Never Again* separates both the text and the reader from the experience, and announces that the thing being judged is finished. It permits a kind of closure.

The search for closure is, of course, the common element in the two contradictory impulses I have been discussing: towards a total reckoning and towards tragedy. It is also, not surprisingly, a key element in the “mythic structure” that Wendy Griswold identifies as common to many war novels. It is a six-stage structure:

1. Confidence and high hopes
2. Intimations that all might not go well
3. Ups and Downs of wartime
4. Increasing despair, chaos, death, and horror
5. The death of someone who is educated, wise, or otherwise highly valued
6. Survival plus disillusionment (232-3)

It is worth considering this structure first in relation to Ike’s *Sunset at Dawn*—which conforms almost perfectly to it—and then in relation to *Half of a Yellow Sun*, because Adichie’s novel deviates significantly from the “mythical structure” Griswold outlines, and in doing so perhaps approaches a solution to the genre’s central dilemma.

Sunset at Dawn follows the progress of the hapless Dr. Amilo Kanu. Initially “an outspoken advocate of a united Nigeria” (30), he and his Hausa wife are driven out of the North after the second coup. Kanu becomes an equally eager advocate of Biafra, where he is made the Director of Mobilization, and is full of optimistic plans to ensure the new

nation's success. But all of his plans—to save Enugu, to avoid resorting to conscription, to build an elite training camp, to woo black America—are either unsuccessful or abortive. Meanwhile, conditions in Biafra decline steadily. The crowning failure comes when Kanu finally joins the army. One paragraph has him planning to enlist; the next has him “wrapped in bandages” with no intervening action (211). He is killed in a bombing raid while still in hospital: “the plane missed or deliberately spared the main blocks and struck only the staff house which had been converted into an amenity ward . . . with Dr Kanu as its lone occupant” (234).

The structure here, both as Griswold outlines it and as it plays out in *Sunset at Dawn*, belongs broadly to tragedy. The plot follows the progress of a tragic hero, Amilo Kanu, a good man with a fatal flaw: an inability to see anything through to a successful conclusion. Admittedly, Ike treats his hero with a certain degree of irony; his inability to see things through extends to a farcically abortive affair with a woman called “Love.” Nevertheless, the death of Amilo Kanu marks the death of Biafra, an event that leaves the survivors diminished but capable of going forward. *Sunset at Dawn* ends with a postscript: “From Biafranism back to Nigerianism. Each person sought his own hideout, to bury his discarded Biafran skin” (246). It is a pretty minimal renewal, certainly, and a rather grim kind of closure, but there is a definite sense that what has passed in the novel is, to paraphrase Aristotle, an action serious and complete in itself. In other words, there is an underlying desire here, as in much Biafran War fiction, to close the book on the episode—a desire encapsulated in the title of Flora Nwapa's war novel: *Never Again*.

Half of a Yellow Sun also seems, at first glance to have exactly the structure that Wendy Griswold identifies. However, it introduces an important variation in the fifth stage. That is, there is no death of the kind Griswold describes. Instead, there is a disappearance. Kainene—Olanna's sister and Richard's fiancée—is lost when she goes on *afia attack* (trading behind enemy lines) in an attempt to get food for the refugees under her care. She has unexpectedly become, as “despair, chaos, death, and horror” threaten those around her, the strength that holds everyone together, so her disappearance, which remains unexplained at the end of the book, makes a more fitting metaphor for what's lost at war's end than her death would have been. Her death would be final and measurable; her absence remains irresolvable. As a result, there is no closing of the book; indeed, the novel's last gesture is towards a book yet to be opened, Ugwu's *The World Was Silent When We Died*.

Half of a Yellow Sun, then, rejects the possibility of a “total assessment.” Part of the reason for this is, as I have suggested, that there can be no total assessment, on the human scale, of a war. One does not experience a war; one experiences “despair, chaos, death, and horror.” But *Half of a Yellow Sun* rejects a total assessment also because the legacy of the Biafran War (itself the legacy of colonial policy) continues to shape life in Nigeria. Occasionally, *Half of a Yellow Sun* makes the connections more or less explicit. The Biafran army officer who conscripts Ugwu into

“a new world in which he [has] no say” (359), for example, is nicknamed “Kill and Go” (350). This is infamously the nickname of the Mobile Police used to brutally suppress Ogoni protests in the Niger Delta in the 1990s (Maier 91). So a genetic history of brutality is being traced. Principally, however, the connections between Biafra and its legacy are implied by the very fact of the book itself and by that literary tradition it acknowledges. *Half of a Yellow Sun* is a book about the Biafran War by someone born after the war “ended.” But then the Biafran War is in some ways still going on; as Karl Maier observes in *This House Has Fallen*, disabled veterans of the Biafran army can still be seen begging at roadsides and the war is “still in the mind of everyone in eastern Nigeria” (271). In some sense then, eastern Nigeria is still inhabiting that blank space that follows the declaration of peace in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, still unsure whether it has survived or what survival might mean.

Half of a Yellow Sun acknowledges that blank space, but accepts too—in a way that *Destination Biafra*, *The Siren in the Night* and *Never Again* cannot—that it is a blank that can only be tentatively and incompletely filled.

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