



# Witnessing War: Trauma, Memory, And Ethical Storytelling In Half Of A Yellow Sun

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## Abstract

By applying the intersecting theory of trauma and the study of memory, this paper will argue that *Half of a Yellow Sun* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a powerful type of ethical witnessing of the Biafran war. Going beyond traditional historical narration the paper attempts to understand how Adichie portrays war not as a chronological chain of events, but as a discontinuous experiential reality of loss, displacement and psychological cataclysm. Based on trauma theory, the paper examines formal strategies in the novel such as nonlinear structure, silence, and repetitions as the manifestation of the belated and disruptive quality of traumatic memory. It also shows how individual memory, group memory, and narrative reconstruction challenge detected histories and recover the lost experiences through the prism of memory.

The main thesis proposes that the storytelling in the novel is an ethical gesture: it testifies to suffering but requires the reader to take part in the ethical aspects of violence and historical displacement. Placing fiction as the location where memory and testimony meet, the paper aims at adding to the body of postcolonial trauma studies by demonstrating how literary accounts transform historical knowledge and establish other archives of war.

## Introduction

One of the most common functions of literary representations of war can be described as something more than historical memory; as a way of interpretation in which memory, trauma, and moral responsibility come together. This role is quite important in the postcolonial context since literature is often used as an alternative collection of historical records which documents the experiences that are excluded or silenced by the official history. *Half of a Yellow Sun* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is an example of such a dynamic due to the sensitive way of how it depicts the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970), often called the Biafran War. By so doing, it provokes important questioning in the way narrative form itself is a means of ethical encounter with the past.

The Biafran War is considered to be one of the most terrible wars in the African history after independence that lead to high numbers of civilians casualties, famine and massive displacement. But its international literary acknowledgment was relatively small up until decades ago, and even in the Nigerian discussion, it was usually the politics that created the veil of memory and selective memory. By building the war through various voices, personal narratives with the greater social-political truths, Adichie intrudes into this historical silence in her novel, rebuilding it. This narrative approach does not only make the conflict human but also asks some crucial questions concerning the role of fiction in the process of remembering and witnessing. In turn, the novel offers ample space to explore the connection between narrating and moral accountability in the wake of the common tragedy.

Literature Scholarship The study of war narratives has traditionally placed a significant focus on the ability of literature to express the experience that cannot be incorporated in a straightforward historical depiction. A theme of fragmentation, displacement and identity change is a regular topic in studies of postcolonial war fiction, which are said to undermine hegemonic historiographies by prioritizing subaltern voices. In the meantime, the research on trauma has added a theoretical lexicon to the comprehension of the narrative form in terms of the psychological discontinuity, with repetition, silence, and the dislocation of time playing a significant role in the trauma experience representation.

Cathy Caruth has also played a key role in theorizing the state of trauma as an experience that cannot be understood at that time and comes back later in the form of narrative in this interdisciplinary field. Her writing highlights the contradiction in the fact that trauma requires representation and is, at the same time, what renders the narration of the coherent stories impossible. On the same note, Dominick LaCapra makes a distinction between acting out and working through and provides a framework through which one may understand how narratives may or may not perpetuate or critically process traumatic histories. These views are complemented by the study on memory, whereby Paul Ricoeur points out the interpretive aspects of remembering and the non-moral aspects of the representability of the past. Lastly, Shoshana Felman prefigures the question of testimony and witnessing, in which she thinks literature can be a place where past traumas are conveyed not just through the factual record of historical events, but by emotional means as well.

Nevertheless, although there is a rich mass of scholarship about *Half of a Yellow Sun*, it has generally remained the subject of much critical work that has emphasized its historical realism, political criticism or national allegory. Although these methods shed some light on postcolonial identity and state violence as the novel itself, they tend to ignore relatively unexplored what narrative ethics are, that is, how storytelling itself positions an ethical relationship between text, history, and reader. The idea of witnessing has been a fruitful point of focus in this case, as it dispels the focus on what the novel is and focuses on how It is, with the moral consequences of telling of suffering. The above gap indicates that there is a need to conduct an ongoing analysis based on the combination of theory of trauma, theory of memory, and narrative ethics to analyze the novel as a historical narrative rather than as an ethical intervention.

This paper, therefore, poses the following research questions: How does *Half of a Yellow Sun* use narrative form as a way to show both the psychological and collective aspects of traumas? The questions lead to an inquiry that contextualizes the novel in the context of wider arguments concerning the role of literature in mediating the historical violence.

This paper is based on the core idea that *Half of a Yellow Sun* represents a piece of narrative ethics where the issues of trauma and memory do not represent thematic interests but rather the structural principles that inform the way the text addresses the history. In this regard, the text illustrates that fiction can fill the divide

between historical knowledge and moral knowledge and this can make storytelling a kind of remembrance that cannot be erased or simplified.

The paper follows a methodological approach that is interdisciplinary where it incorporates close textual analysis and theoretical interpretation. The central narrative moments (including descriptions of displacement, silence and recollection) are analyzed to demonstrate how both form and content interrelate to create an ethics of witnessing. Instead of viewing theory as an outsourced system foisted on the text, the analysis views theoretical concepts in a conversation with the narrative strategies of the novel, and how literary form in itself produces theoretical knowledge.

Three strands complemented each other in the theoretical framework. The theory of trauma offers the means of interpreting the novel portrayal of psychological discontinuity and time displacement, especially in the concept of belatedness as Caruth suggests and the concept of working through as LaCapra suggests. Based on Ricoeur, memory studies help us to understand how the novel makes its way through the interaction of individual remembrance and collective history, which anticipates interpretively and reconstruction as a feature of remembering. Based on the literature on testimony by Felman, narrative ethics can be understood as an encounter that requires the reader to be responsible, as it focuses on the moral consequences of narrating suffering. Combined, these viewpoints can be used to carry out a more detailed discussion of how the novel creates another form of historical perception that is based on empathy and critical thinking.

Placing *Half of a Yellow Sun* at the crossroads of trauma and memory and ethics, this study plays a role in a current debate concerning the place of literature in defining the historical consciousness of postcolonialism. It asserts that the value of the novel is not just in the way it portrays war but the way it reinvents the possibilities of recounting histories of violence, personal memory and ethical interest. It is through this that the text is viewed as a strong reminder that storytelling is not a neutral activity; it is a witnessing activity that has aesthetic and moral implications.

## **Chapter 1: Trauma and Narrative Representation of War.**

This chapter explores how *Half of a Yellow Sun* formally denotes trauma in the way it interrupts linear narration and pre-empts psychological and embodied experiences of war. Instead of describing conflict in terms of strategic or heroic processes, the novel builds up the trauma as an organizational focus of creating narrative time, voice, and perception.

### **1.1 The Theory of Trauma and the Literary Reflection.**

The implications of the trauma theory on the war narratives are that it is an essential perspective of how war narratives transcend the traditional ways of representing it. Belatedness, as Cathy Caruth defines it, describes the nature of trauma, which is not the experience in the moment, but a phenomenon that comes back later with the help of memory, repetition, and gaps in narration. This idea is useful in understanding why the novel often is not chronologically clear, but rather presents traumatic experience in bits and emotionally after-shocking.

In the same vein, Dominick LaCapra differentiates between acting out and working through whereby trauma narratives are usually characterized by relapsing and reflecting. The characters in the novel are constantly forced to deal with the recollection of loss and violence and it turns out that the process of storytelling is a negotiation and not a resolution of the traumatic past.

These theoretical orientations make light of the way the text attempts to dismantle the belief that war may be depicted in a transparent way. Instead, it awaits the limits of representation and shows that the trauma

interrupts the language, coherence and narrative authority. This is because war is not simply narrated, it is re-experienced by narrative form.

## 1.2 Disrupted and Temporal Narrative and Disruption.

The nonlinear structure of the novel is one of the most vivid formal elements of the novel. The story switches between pre-war, wartime, and post-war events, which generates a time swing that is reminiscent of traumatic memory. However, instead of moving towards a steady resolution, the narration continually goes back to the scenes of crisis and stresses the way in which trauma breaks down the boundaries between the past and the present.

This discontinuity is indicative of what theorists of trauma term traumatic temporality, that time becomes recursive and not linear. The repetition, sudden jumps, and story gaps depict the hardships of working out the traumatic experience into a coherent narrative. Events of emotional intensity frequently transiently break the sequence of chronology and highlight the unsteadiness of memory.

As a critique of traditional war realism, narrative rupture also serves. Traditional war discourses tend to focus on cause and effect, conflict is a series of events leading to a resolution. On the contrary, the discontinuous structure of the novel does not allow easy resolution of the narrative, which indicates that the psychological repercussions of the war could not be contained in the linear framework of the narrative so simply.

By the means of these methods, the text turns the narrative form into the simile of the traumatic experience, in which discontinuity and uncertainty gain the predominance in the process of creating meaning.

## 1.3 The Body as a Site of Trauma

Although the concept of temporal fragmentation is used to transmit psychological discontinuity, trauma in the novel is also rooted in the corporeality of the body. The abstract political war is prefigured by scenes of starvation, illness, displacement, and physical violence, which redirect the focus of the viewer away from abstract political war to the life of the war.

This focus is more consistent with the affect theory, specifically, the work of Sara Ahmed, which focuses on how emotions and bodily experience form social and political reality. Hunger, fear, and exhaustion in the novel are not only a background information, they are the organizing features of how the world is perceived by the characters, the body is turned into the storage of the past.

Through foregrounding in the form of experiencing suffering, the text counters heroic images of war, which place an emphasis on strategy and triumph. Rather, it discloses the conflict as a process that sites itself on the bodies making trauma visible through the physical vulnerability. The emphasis on the corporeality also supports the ethical aspect of the story and encourages the readers to address the humanity of political violence.

In that regard, the body also becomes a place of memory and a place of testimony, as it fills the gap between individual experience and history as a whole.

## Key Findings of Chapter 1

Trauma is a form of structural principle which determines narrative form instead of a thematic issue.

Discontinuous chronology and plotting reflect the mental confusion that war brings about.

The novel is a conflict in the manifestation of suffering, which is embodied, the emphasis is made on vulnerability instead of heroism.

The text opposed the linear kind of realism and brings out the constraints of historical narration.

## Chapter 2: Memory, Witnessing and Narrative Ethics.

In this chapter, we will discuss how Half of a Yellow Sun has turned narrative into an ethical process of memory. The novel re-places fiction as a site by foregrounding the memory, testimony and narrative responsibility; the effect of the novel is to place history not merely as a site represented but as a space where it is involved and engaged morally. The chapter shows through the use of memory studies, trauma theory and postcolonial ethics how narrative voice can be utilized as a way of witnessing and opposing historical erasure.

### 2.1 The Second Memory and the Construction of History.

Memory in the novel is not a passive recall of the events that happened in the past but a dynamic experience by which the past is created and understood. The story alternates between the individual memories, the close recollections of the family, loss, and displacement, and the collective recollection of the Biafran War. This conflict between personal experience and the historical consciousness of a community is emphasized by this interaction.

The contribution made by Paul Ricoeur is the key to the interpretation of this dynamic. According to Ricoeur, the process of memory and history is mediated by narrative, i.e. the past can be easily understood, because the past is accessible through storytelling. The characters in the novel recreate their experiences using memory, which explains that recollection is influenced by feeling, trauma and outlook.

Memory therefore becomes precarious and creative, precarious in the sense that it is characterized by blank spaces and distortions, and creative in the sense in which it can help preserve the past that might otherwise be forgotten. The text questions the concept of history as an objective and unchanging record by placing memory at the centre of its narrative structure allowing it to be a living and interpretative process.

### 2.2 Ethical Witnessing and Testimony.

One of the major aspects of the ethical system of the novel is its depiction of the characters as witnesses. Their stories are testimonies that record violence, suffering and survival and the personal experience is turned into the memory of the group. By engaging in the storytelling, the characters do not only testify to their individual tragedy, but also to the larger historical tragedy of war.

The idea of witnessing is based on the studies by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub who suggest that the testimony is a story and a moral action. In the case of Felman and Laub, to bear witness is a relationship process whereby the hearer or the reader is involved in the process of remembering. This framework assists in describing how the novel beckons the readers into an ethical connection with the past placing them not in the role of detached onlookers but a part of the procedure directed at historical acknowledgment.

Offering a variety of testimonies as opposed to one authoritative story, the narrative highlights the plurality of historical truth that is composed of the many experiences. The act of witnessing turns out to be a collaborative process with a stress on the fact that memory is maintained during the collective process of narration and reception.

### **2.3 Narrative accountability and Postcolonial Ethics.**

Other underlying questions to the novel are the narrative authority: with whom do we grant the right to narrate, and who are the voices that will and will not be listened to? These are some of the questions that are especially important in a postcolonial context, where the history of colonization has frequently been told in a colonial manner that omits the indigenous ones.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak works are a critical study of these problems. The interrogative character of the subaltern representation presented by Spivak sheds light on the difficulties of representing subjects of marginalization and the risk of immorality of the appropriation. The narrative authority is also varied throughout the novel, with multiple points of view involved, which indicates that there was an intention to avoid the use of a singular dominant voice.

Emmanuel Levinas, who developed the notion of the ethics of the Other, sheds more light on this ethical aspect, which focuses on the responsibility that is shown towards the vulnerability of other people. This ethical inclination is shown in the story through suffering, displacement and loss; these aspects make the readers feel a need to follow through the lives of the characters as experiential activities that must not be overlooked and have the importance of compassion.

These theoretical frameworks bring about storytelling not only as a representation but also as a moral practice that is informed by questions of power, voice and responsibility.

### **2.4 Fiction as Counter-History**

The combination of memory, testimony and ethical reflection makes the novel a kind of a counter-history- an alternative archive, archiving the experiences of those who are not reflected in the official or historical narrations. Instead of working as one story about the Biafran War, it builds a mosaic of the viewpoints that, as a whole, disrupt historical approaches to the conflict.

It is in keeping with the New Historicism theoretical approach that stresses the interdependence of historical discourse and literature. In this view, fiction will be a place where the cultural memory is negotiated and fought. The close examination of daily life, emotional sceneries, and personal losses in the novel presents an account of history based on the lived experience and not the political abstraction.

Being a counter-historical work, the narrative does not purport to substitute the official history but add to it and confuse it. It broadens the historical interpretation and emphasizes the importance of literature in creating the memory of a group of people by preempting marginalized voices and intimate experiences.

### **Key Findings of Chapter 2**

Memory acts as a kind of resistance that is able to keep the histories that are susceptible to erasure alive.

Testimony turns narrating into an ethical witnessing, which involves implicating the reader.

Authority is negotiated and narrated by the use of questions of voice, representation and responsibility.

The novel serves as a counter-historical archive, which rebuilds the past using a lived experience instead of an official one.

## Conclusion

This paper has presented the argument that *Half of a Yellow Sun* has changed the literary perception of war by shifting the concept of trauma, memory, and narration to a morality of witnessing. Instead of being a pure historical novel about the Biafran War, the text stands as a form of narrative intervention that rewrites the process of the understanding of violence. The novel illustrates the process of embodiment in the face of suffering as well as in the face of the psychological rupture, unstable mechanisms of recollection to show that histories of conflict can no longer be properly described in linear or strictly factual terms. Rather, they need forms that would be able to accommodate fragmentation, silence, and multiplicity.

Trauma is possible not only a thematic issue in the novel but also a principle of structure that guides its narrative. The nonlinear chronology, change of focalization, and narrative ruptures are a reflection of the disorienting temporal experience of the traumatic experience. Informed by the theory of trauma, the analysis demonstrated how the text challenges the traditional war realism in that they tend to emphasize the coherence, causality, and resolution. In comparison, the novel introduces war as a form of experience that lacks continuity and timeliness and puts the permeability of representation into the spotlight. This emphasis on the body as a place of trauma further supports this point of view by basing historical tragedy in material and lived suffering and not abstract political speech. With these formal strategies, the narrative does not only describe the trauma but implements it, asking the readers to experience the instability and vulnerability that characterize the experiences of the characters.

It is based on this that this paper has delved into the way memory and testimony changes the narrative into an ethical space. The novel creates history as a product of individual memories and the collective memory in that memory is interpretive as well as relational. Using the research into memory, the chapter established the mediation of storytelling between personal experience and the larger historical consciousness, showing the past as a dynamic experience, not an archive. In this regard, test testimony turns out to be a primary narrative mode: characters turn into witnesses whose narration allows keeping alive the experiences that otherwise will not be recognized. This focus on seeing transforms the role of narrative into one of ethical encounter making the readers to be the agents to the process of remembering.

It was also found that the Interrogation of narrative authority in the novel exists in a postcolonial context. Through voice dispensing in several points of view, the text is not dominated by one interpretive system and prefigures the difficulties of describing collective trauma. Whose, who heard, how are some of the questions that are at the heart of its ethical project. In this regard, narration is disclosed to be a responsibility of some kind—a practice that has moral consequences to both the storyteller and his audience. This is further emphasized by the fact that the novel can be seen as a counter-historical archive which maintains the emotional and social aspects of war that are common to the official histories to ignore. It creates a different way of historical knowledge based on empathy, plurality and critical reflections through fiction.

To sum up all these results, it is possible to state that the novel is not only important in terms of its representation of the Biafran War but also in terms of its reconstruction of the relationship between narrative and history. The inclusion of trauma, memory, and ethical witnessing into its formal structure makes the text offer readers an opportunity to reevaluate how the stories about violence are narrated and what may be the meaning of experiencing and responding to them in a responsible way. It is an indication that literature can be a medium through which historical knowledge is transcended into moral knowledge and an area in which the intricacies of suffering may be recognized without being turned into spectacle and abstraction.

In a wider scope, the research paper will add to the existing knowledge of the scholarship of postcolonial trauma in that it shows how literary narratives serve as a historical reconstruction site. Fiction plays a critical role in ensuring that the marginalized experiences are preserved in situations where an official archive might be incomplete, conflicting or politicized. The novel is an example of how the narration can produce a pluralized historical consciousness, the recognition of the existence of a variety of approaches and the inability of one definite description. A view like this does not only enrich our knowledge about the past but also projects the ethical investment of the past.

In conclusion, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie introduces storytelling as something aesthetic, historical, and moral at the same time. The story also demands that the process of remembering is not a passive concept but an ethical duty, and the voices, experiences, and silences all need to be listened to. The novel reminds readers of the ability of literature to develop empathy and criticality by placing them in a place of the emotional and psychological realities of war.

It is against this backdrop that the text is an interesting example of how fiction can redefine the ways that societies are recalling conflict. It shows that such work of narrative is not merely retelling of what has or has not happened but rather the building of spaces within which human implications of the past can be experienced, understood and morally involved. The novel with its complex combination of trauma, memory, narrative voice, allows affirming the long-lasting ability of literature to witness suffering and provide ideas of reflection, recognition as well as understanding.

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