

Gender Performance, Trauma, and Orality in Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Purple Hibiscus*

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## DEDICATION

For my parents, who have supported all of my adventures, projects, and academic endeavors with constant love and encouragement. I will be forever grateful.

## ABSTRACT

Gender Performance, Trauma, and Storytelling in Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Purple Hibiscus*  
(Under the Direction of Adetayo Alabi)

This thesis examines Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Purple Hibiscus* in order to explore the implications of trauma on middleclass Igbo women's gender performance. The traumas that the women encounter within the novels occur within the domestic sphere and are results of the Biafran War in *Half of a Yellow Sun* and domestic abuse in *Purple Hibiscus*. This thesis interrogates women's experiences within the domestic sphere, ultimately reflecting a larger national trauma that Biafra and later Nigeria undergo as a result of colonial occupation. This thesis concludes with an exploration of the culturally specific practice of orality and storytelling that occurs within both novels that ultimately initiates the healing process for the individual, as well as the nation.

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GENDER PERFORMANCE, TRAUMA, AND ORALITY IN ADICHIE'S *HALF OF A  
YELLOW SUN AND PURPLE HIBISCUS*

INTRODUCTION

This thesis uses Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Purple Hibiscus* to explore trauma, specifically the traumatic effects of the Biafran War and domestic abuse, and its impact on middleclass Igbo women's gender performances. The project connects the changing gender performances within the domestic sphere with both national themes of womanhood and political instability. In order to accomplish this, this thesis examines female characters' gender performances before and after their interactions with traumatic situations. Similarly, by interrogating women's place within the domestic sphere and their changing gender performance, a connection is made between the state of Nigerian politics, women's place in politics, and their experiences with war. The primary goal of this thesis is to expose middleclass Igbo women's ability to adapt and challenge their position within local, national, and transnational society. Once the connections between the public and private, and the local and national have been made, this thesis will expose the culturally specific practice of storytelling as the primary method for initiating the healing process, both individually and nationally, after

personal trauma and the national trauma of Nigeria's past. This chapter will serve as an introduction to the following chapters by introducing various concepts and outlining the arguments that will be made in each chapter.

The second chapter of this thesis focuses on the changing gender performances of the protagonists of Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* during the Biafran War. Most people assume men are the only people who experience war, yet Adichie's novel utilizes domestic setting to expose "narratives of (gendered) lives who live (gendered) wars" (Sjoberg 248). This chapter will compare the domestic roles of Olanna and Kainene before and during the Biafran War in order to illustrate their interactions with war and their agency as women within the home. By combating the common narrative of an androcentric war experience, Adichie illustrates the need for the recognition of women's gendered experience with war. Because the women's gender performances are altered and they are exposed to trauma, women cross class lines and begin to unify in order to support each other and ultimately survive. Therefore, this chapter concludes with an argument for the acknowledgement of women's lived interactions with war and their unification across class lines during trauma.

The third chapter of this thesis uses Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* to explore the altered gender performance of Kambili Achike after her experience of continual and extreme physical and psychological abuse from her father. Kambili must alter her gender performance in an attempt to gain agency and autonomy from her father. Adichie uses the domestic model of the Achike family in order to reflect the larger national political situation—dictator-like leaders abusing power and oppressing the general public. It is only once Kambili finds refuge within her aunt Ifeoma's democratic home that she is able

to discover her voice and is able to oppose her father. Kambili alters her gender performance and gains agency through her voice; thus, Adichie uses Kambili as a model for the Nigerian people because she uses her voice to gain agency, a task that the Nigerian public must initiate in order to ignite democratic change within Nigeria. Like Olanna and Kainene in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Kambili reacts to trauma within the domestic sphere and gains agency for herself, which conveys a larger national message of using one's voice to gain autonomy and democracy.

After exposing the trauma faced by both Nigerians and their country, the fourth chapter will explore how the culturally specific method of storytelling allows both individuals and the nation to initiate the healing process after experiencing trauma. The antecedents of African literature are rooted within the process of orature and storytelling. Thus, the process of self-expression and vocalization of trauma becomes imperative for both national and individual healing. The experiences of individuals create a national story, meaning that the characters of these novels must tell their story to create both positive and negative aspects of national healing. This chapter argues that healing cannot begin until trauma has been vocalized. Storytelling is the only way Nigerian, specifically Igbo, personhood, culture, and history will survive.

The final chapter of this thesis serves as a summation and conclusion for the first four chapters. Both *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Purple Hibiscus* utilize elements of the local, national, and transnational. The women in these novels continually face trauma, but they use storytelling to initiate healing and begin to alter their gender performances to ensure survival. Throughout this thesis, it becomes clear that the trauma the women face is truly inflicted "upon the mind," rather than the body. Adichie's novels reflect the

mental obstacles that become necessary to overcome local and national trauma. Thus, this thesis will expose these obstacles and explore how the middleclass Igbo women in Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Purple Hibiscus* overcome the challenges created by the repercussions of colonialism and patriarchy that resonate locally and nationally.

Based off of the outline for this thesis, it is clear that both trauma and gender performance become the analytical categories for creating the argument that middleclass Igbo women's performance within the domestic sphere becomes altered as a result of trauma and the domestic sphere becomes a larger microcosm for the nation. It is clear in Adichie's novels that trauma is "a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind" (Caruth 3). The women witness and participate in horrifying acts against human nature, which inflicts extreme psychological damage onto the women. Because of this psychological change, the women begin to perform their position as middleclass Igbo women in different ways in order to ensure future survival. Judith Butler defines gender performance as "a stylized repetition of acts...which are internally discontinuous...[so that] the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief" (179). By using the analytical categories of trauma and gender performance, it becomes evident that middleclass Igbo women undergo a performance alteration as a result of trauma, which ultimately reflects the changing dynamics within the household and nation.

A large portion of the traumatic experiences faced by Nigerians can be credited to the colonization of Nigeria by the British. In 1914, the British created the political entity

presently known as Nigeria after occupying the region for the latter half of the nineteenth century. For decades, the British abused their power by imposing Western practices onto the Nigerian people, which forged drastic political, economic, and cultural changes within the country. The Nigerians were stripped of all autonomy until they gained independence from British rule in 1960. However, independence was accompanied by power struggles amongst various ethnic groups within Nigeria, and a civil war ensued from 1966-1970. With over a million lives lost, the Nigerian people craved political and economic stability, but military regimes and failed attempts at republics plagued the nation for many decades following the civil war. Today, Nigeria elects their leaders through democratic elections, but there are still many ethnic and religious disputes that divide the nation. Ultimately, the colonization of Nigeria traumatized the people within the region, and the repercussions of colonialism inspired future traumas, in both the domestic and national realms, during postcolonial decades.

Therefore, Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Purple Hibiscus* illustrate many of the repercussions of colonialism on the individual Nigerian, through the utilization of domestic settings, and the Nigerian nation as a whole, through the parallels of domestic settings and national settings. The following chapters will reveal Adichie's belief that Nigeria will be able to overcome trauma on the individual and national levels through the acceptance of both traditional and colonial practices, a new national performance.

## Chapter II

### Gender Performance and War in Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*

For centuries, literature has depicted war through an androcentric lens, reinforcing the myth that women are silent sufferers during war. For example, Shakespeare's *Henry V*, O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, and Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* were written in different time periods and cultures, but they fail to incorporate women's experiences and interactions with war. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* counters the aforementioned authors' assumption that war is a predominately male experience through the depiction of female characters as active participants in the Biafran War. Adichie illustrates the various ways that middleclass Igbo men and middleclass Igbo women experience the Biafran war, which supports Laura Sjoberg's claim that "[w]hile war has gendered causes, gendered practices, and gendered consequences, it is also lived and experience in gendered ways" (252). Therefore, this chapter will interrogate the alterations of gender performance as a result of trauma. By analyzing both male and female reactions to the hardships and dangers imposed by the Biafran War in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, this essay will demonstrate the active role middleclass Igbo women assume during war and expound on the various ways women's gender performativity is altered as a result of their interactions with conflict. Olanna and

Kainene, twin sisters who are the female protagonists in Adichie's novel, have direct interactions with war. Thus, this chapter will reflect on the immediate need for the inclusion of gendered war discourses when discussing the repercussion of wartime traumas and expound on ways that the Biafran War creates a non-hierarchical network of female relationships among women of various classes within the Biafran nation.

In an effort to prevent "discursive colonization," this essay will utilize a postcolonial feminist reading of *Half of a Yellow Sun*, as outlined by Chandra Talpade Mohanty's "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," to analyze Kainene and Olanna's positionalities as heterosexual, middleclass Igbo women and the gender performances that occupy these positionalities (333). This postcolonial feminist reading will include an observance of the specific experiences of middleclass Igbo women and an acknowledgement of the historical past that dictates the women's position within their culture. In addition, this chapter will utilize Butler's theory on gender performance by exploring the changes of Kainene and Olanna's performances in order to gain a better understanding of the changes that occur as a result of war.

This performance of middleclass Igbo womanhood in *Half of a Yellow Sun* will be analyzed using a gendered lens through the comparison of Kainene and Olanna's actions before and during the Biafran war and by acknowledging the gender roles of Odenigbo, Olanna's husband, and Richard, Kainene's partner. Binaries surrounding womanhood and manhood during war bombard societal expectations of gender

performance within the Igbo culture. Adichie includes both the female protagonists and the male protagonists because it allows for:

[the interrogation of] the pervasive gender dichotomy and related myths in war narratives: male combatants/female noncombatants, female life givers/male life takers, female peace-makers/male war-mongers, female 'Beautiful Soul'/male 'Just Warrior'—dichotomies that fail adequately to capture the circumstances and reality of women and men in open conflicts. (Nnaemeka 236)

The four protagonists clearly break these binaries attached to war narratives because dire circumstances force them to cross gender lines in order to protect themselves and their families. This is evident through Adichie's utilization of temporal shifts that occur between each part of *Half of a Yellow Sun*. These temporal shifts allow for the contrast of the middleclass Igbo women and men's roles before and after the war, highlighting their adoption of new gender performances within the domestic sphere once war ensues.

Adichie's novel is set in postcolonial Igboland and spans from the years directly succeeding Nigeria's independence from Britain in the early 1960's to the end of the Biafran War in 1970. Before colonization, multiple ethnic groups and a decentralized government characterized the southeastern area of present day Nigeria. Britain's attempt to colonize and westernize the region included the categorization and grouping of previously autonomous masses of people based off of their shared languages, cultural practices, and region. This act of colonization in present day Nigeria acted as a contributing factor to the Biafran War because it

encouraged the Igbo to unite, and this unification ultimately allowed the people residing in Igboland to secede from the rest of Nigeria in 1967 (Falola 96). Moreover, it is important to acknowledge the impacts of England's colonization of Nigeria because their imposition of rigid gender ideologies directly challenged Igbo cultural practices and altered future gender relations. Ifi Amadiume's *Male Daughters, Female Husbands* outlines the significant changes imposed by Western ideologies during colonization by comparing the economic power, beliefs surrounding marriage and motherhood, political power, and educational rights of Igbo women, specifically in the town of Nnobi, in pre-colonial Nigeria, colonial Nigeria, and postcolonial Nigeria. As Amadiume explains in her book, the colonization of present day Nigeria greatly impacted the social roles of Nigerian women, which becomes important in understanding the positionalities of middleclass Igbo women before and after the Biafran War in Adichie's novel because their performances of womanhood manifest themselves in new ways, which become comparable to Igbo women's performances in pre-colonial Igboland.

Kainene and Olanna undergo the struggles of the Biafran war simultaneously as they encounter a gender war. This gender war arises from "adverse circumstances, and their mastery of war-time life, their experiences of closeness to death, powerlessness and the disintegration of order [which] eventually result[s] in a growth of their strength" (Pape 100). In other words, Kainene and Olanna's reactions to war challenge their previous roles as women by illustrating their resilience in a life-threatening and trying situation. It is important to note that Adichie's primary focus within this novel is on middleclass Igbo "new women,"

women who reject traditional values, who, for the most part, are not controlled or overtly oppressed by the men in their lives. Although Kainene and Olanna do not face oppression within their own home, Adichie does not fail to acknowledge the repercussions of war on women that become exponentially rife during the Biafran War. Therefore, the gender war that Kainene and Olanna participate in through their adoption of new gender performances is not fighting to destruct of patriarchy; rather, the gender war fights for a new definition of womanhood and “(re-) negotiations of gender relations” in order to deconstruct strict gender roles and create a new positionality for women after their encounters with war (Pape 101).

Kainene and Olanna are educated middleclass Igbo women who are the daughters of a “Big Man,” a man who has both power and money in postcolonial Nigeria. Adichie includes depictions of the characters’ lives before and during the war because “the reader must become familiar with the passions of her characters’ daily lives if they are ever to intimate the negative impacts of civil war and begin to appreciate the privations of conflict” (Norridge, “Sex As Synecdoche” 19). Therefore, the reader receives a clear picture of the characteristics and lifestyles of the two protagonists. For the professional and assertive Kainene, business was her first priority while the cheerful and thoughtful Olanna focuses on her education and family. Kainene performs womanhood by conforming to expectations of a female boss in her father’s factories and through her relationship with Richard, a white English writer. Olanna’s gender performance consists of teaching at a university in Nsukka and being a mother and partner to Odenigbo.

These two women reject many aspects of traditional Nigerian womanhood and embody the description of “new women” that was previously described. Kainene and Olanna are “impetuous women who want to have their own experiences” and “decline the image of [woman] their mother embodies” (Page 131-132). Kainene lives alone, dates a white British man, and is first introduced to readers by Richard as having the appearance of a politician’s mistress because of her “brazenly red lipstick, her tight dress, [and] her smoking” (Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun* 71). Rejecting tradition like her sister, Olanna lives with Odenigbo for years before she decides to marry him. Moreover, before their marriage, she adopts Odenigbo’s child that he conceived with another woman during their relationship. These women do not belong within the category of traditional Nigerian women. Yet, society accepts this definition of womanhood during times of peace because the two women do not encroach on males’ gender performances. This clear divide between male and female gender performances become unclear as a result of war. Once war ensues, societal perceptions of manhood and womanhood come into question because gender performances must be reconfigured to maintain stability and safety during crisis.

As depicted in Adichie’s novel, once war ensues, women’s gender performances begin to adopt characteristics that were previously attributed to men because many men leave home to assist with the war efforts, and the realities of war create dire circumstances for their families. The lack of provisions, male leadership, and healthcare demands that women adopt new modes of living in order to ensure survival for themselves and their families. Adichie’s use of temporal shifts allows for

the reader to gain a clear understanding that traditional social structures are under siege and so are “gendered feminine codes” (Uwakweh 98). In the parts that depict scenes from the early 1960’s, Olanna generally performs her role as mother and “wife” while Kainene focuses on her work and relationship with Richard. However, in the parts set during the war, Olanna and Kainene embrace the role of familial and communal provider in order for themselves, their families, and other Biafrans to survive.

The onset of the Biafran War continued to “disrupt socialized female codes of behavior” by placing women in superior positions among the men that remained at home. Traditionally, culture viewed men as the heads of households, but the “[war situation], coupled with the scarcity of resources, made wives the bread winners in many homes, and this resulted in the disruption of power-relations in the family—giving wives a superior position to their husbands” (Pape 51). Men who remain at home and do not participate in combat employ defensive mechanisms in an attempt to preserve their masculinity, which becomes challenged as a result of their inability to defend women from the horrors of war and their failure to provide in times of conflict (Sjoberg 267). This is demonstrated by Odenigbo’s decline after months of failing to provide for his family and receiving the news that Northern soldiers killed his mother. With all romanticized notions of the war dissolved, Odenigbo “no longer went into the interior with the Agitator Corps, no longer returned with lit-up eyes. Instead he went to Tanzania Bar every day and came back with a taciturn set to his mouth” (Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun* 404). Olanna assumes the role as the head of the family while Odenigbo revels in his drunken stupor. Thus,

Olanna's placement as the head of the family emerges out of necessity when Odenigbo fails to fulfill the expectations of his gender performance, which includes maintaining the position of provider within the familial unit.

Olanna becomes aware that her position as a middleclass Igbo woman is undergoing a metamorphosis when she begins to face difficult decisions that have the possibility of extremely affecting her family. The pressure for survival requires Olanna to make decisions in situations that she has never had to confront during her life as a middleclass woman. Provisions are scarce, and the responsibility of feeding the family weighs on Olanna because she becomes reduced to begging at relief centers. She finds herself confronted by men attempting to steal her provisions soon after leaving the relief center, and her "fear came with rage, a fierce and emboldening rage, and she imagined fighting them, strangling them, killing them" (Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun* 342). Olanna's emotions reveal her strength and courage during conflict because she continues to return to the relief center despite her fear and guilt for receiving goods for free. War requires Olanna to provide for her family, but this does not stop her from believing she "[was] doing something improper, unethical: expecting to get food in exchange for nothing" (Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun* 343). Yet, Olanna still returns to the relief center everyday, in spite of her pride, so that her family receives the necessary provisions to maintain life. These physical and emotional conflicts that Olanna encounters "reveal a shift in values, changing attitudes to life and the presence of women at the heart of the war zone, central to the preservation of life" (Ugochukwu 256). Olanna recognizes her responsibility of providing for her family and her strength and courage illustrate her

understanding that her former gender performance has become obsolete during war.

Like Olanna, Kainene emerges as a provider once crisis ensues; however, Kainene adopts the role of communal provider rather than a provider for her family. Kainene becomes a food supplier for a refugee camp and begins to supervise the daily functioning of the camp. Richard comments on Kainene's new demeanor once she begins to care for the refugees: "There was a manic vibrancy about her, about the way she left for the refugee camp each day, about the exhaustion that shadowed her eyes when she returned in the evenings" (Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun* 401). Before the war, Kainene simply cared for herself, but, once the war begins, Kainene "welcome[s] the secession [and civil war] as liberation" (Ugochukwu 259). This liberation Kainene achieves is a result of the shedding of her previous gender performance in favor of a new one that includes caring for other people. Although the two women have different experiences with providing for themselves, their families, and other Biafrans, each awakens new feelings within herself—that of strength within Olanna and purpose within Kainene—as a reaction and acknowledgment of evolving gender performances.

War instills a sense of potential in women through their newfound abilities to become providers and rule the familial unit. Conflict encourages them to become self-aware of their gender performance and Olanna and Kainene recognize their potential within the domestic sphere as their new performances of womanhood evolve. The women undergo the hardest experiences of their life, which awakens their fight for survival. After months of providing for her family and constantly

facing the danger of being bombed, Olanna becomes “filled with a frothy rage. It was the very sense of being inconsequential that pushed her from extreme fear to extreme fury. She had to matter. She would no longer exist limply, waiting to die. Until Biafra won, the vandals would no longer dictate the terms of her life” (Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun* 351). Olanna decides at that moment to dictate fate within her own terms, no longer letting the fear of dying control her actions. Previously, Olanna’s gender performance would place her as a victim in this kind of situation because she did not have an understanding of her ability to provide and her strength and courage as a woman; however, her realization of her own agency and subjectivity amidst trauma and her actions during the Biafran War permit her to become an agent of her own well-being.

Similarly, Kainene decides to dictate her fate for herself when she puts her life at risk by participating in an afia attack, which means crossing enemy lines to bring provisions back to Biafra. Kainene becomes disgusted by the conditions of Biafra and tells Odenigbo and Richard “with...finality to her tone” that she has decided to take the risk to cross over to enemy territory (Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun* 505). Kainene no longer wants to be idle while Biafra suffers, so she draws on her own sense of agency to make the decision to travel for provisions. This sense of purpose encourages Kainene to risk her life for the wellbeing of others. Both Kainene and Olanna deviate from the former “sanctioned gender codes” and become empowered by their newfound practice of dictating their own fate and their refusal to be controlled (Uwakweh 98).

Olanna and Kainene's resilience extends past their need to provide for their families through their attempts to see past the war and retain a sense of self. At the height of the war, "there is a blurring of battle lines, as the 'home front' becomes a 'war front' with frequent air raids" (Ouma, "Composite Consciousness" 22). Yet, the two women attempt to maintain normalcy despite the constant threat of the enemy. Olanna suggests a "war-time party" to Odenigbo who believes a "war-time party" is impractical because of the scarcity of resources available to their family. Olanna counters Odenigbo's rejection by saying, "We have more than enough for ourselves" (Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun* 354). While Odenigbo does not recognize the importance of kinship, Olanna's generosity illustrates her willingness to share her family's meager supplies in an effort to regain a sense of their past life and create communal connections. Olanna is able to see past war in order to recognize the importance of friendships and kinship. Like Odenigbo, Richard only sees war and expects Kainene to succumb to the tensions and hardships that accompany the traumatic experiences of civil war. However, he notes the absence of the tension and regret he expects to witness in Kainene: "Kainene laughed. She laughed often these days" (Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun* 469). This laughter represents Kainene's refusal to allow the Biafran War dictate her personhood. The two women do not let war dictate every aspect of their lives, and they refuse to lose their senses of selves even while adopting new gender performances.

Adichie's focus on the lives of Kainene and Olanna results in a positionality that becomes specific to middleclass Igbo women. However, Adichie includes other female working-class characters that undergo exceptional trauma because of the

war. These minor characters alter their gender performances in order to cope with the repercussions of war, much like Kainene and Olanna. A significant portion of the focus of the minor characters' interactions with war consists of their reclamation of the body. Where Kainene and Olanna experience sexuality through "matched desire, an equality of orgasm, a reciprocity of sensation," characters such as the barmaid and Eberechi become targets for sexual exploitation once war begins (Norridge, "Sex As Synecdoche" 28). An Igbo barmaid is gang raped by Igbo soldiers, yet she "stare[s] back at [Ugwu] with calm hate (Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun* 458). The barmaid does not shrink back with fear or embarrassment; rather, she looks into the eyes of Ugwu in an effort to claim her own body, even though she cannot physically stop him, and to condemn his actions. Like the barmaid, Eberechi is manipulated by Igbo soldiers but chooses to use her sexuality to protect the people she loves. Eberechi sleeps with a high-ranking military official to ensure her brother's safety and to prevent Ugwu from being deployed (Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun* 373). Both of these working-class Igbo women enact new sexual aspects of womanhood as a method to survive conflict. However, unlike Kainene and Olanna, they are at a much greater risk of experiencing brutal aspects of war because of their position as working-class women. Adichie's primary focus is on the middleclass Igbo women, but she chooses to include depictions of working-class Igbo women's alterations of gender performativity to exemplify the totalizing effects war has on women, even though not all the effects are identical.

As the war progresses, Igbo women from all classes begin to turn to each other for support during conflict. In the beginning of the novel, Olanna realizes "just

how distant [she and Kainene] had become...Nothing had happened—no momentous quarrel, no significant incident—rather, they had simply drifted apart” (Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun* 46). However, by the end of the war, Kainene and Olanna had “created their own world that [Odenigbo] and Mr. Richard could never quite enter” (Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun* 499). Throughout the course of the novel, conflict allows these two women to reshape their relationships between each other and other women. The absence of men, physically if they are at war and mentally if they remain at home, lead women to seek friendships across class lines in order to strengthen their chances of survival and find comfort amidst trauma. The friendship between Mrs. Muokelu, a working-class Igbo woman, and Olanna is mutually beneficial because the women share knowledge and goods. Similarly, the relationship that arises between Olanna and Alice is described as a “vulgar and delicious female bond” because the women laugh and share secrets, resulting in a mutually supportive friendship (Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun* 422). The Igbo women from various classes create a non-hierarchical community in which they all benefit from, whether it is from the sharing of goods or the companionship created between two women.

The Biafran nation during this time becomes its own entity fighting for nationhood. Similarly, these women form bonds that create a national identity for Biafran women, and they create a community in which they all benefit. These types of relationships reveal that “[w]omen characters in civil war texts gain strength on a collective as well as an individual basis” (Pape 127). Women’s reliance on each other and their reciprocated supports become crucial “in the national journey toward

healing” (Ogunyemi 126). Without each other, the Biafran women would lose a key component of their emerging performances as Biafran women, and they would struggle to survive without the kinship networks created amongst the female community. The characters from this novel individually change their gender performances to encompass the conflicts instilled upon their specific class. However, they also collectively change their various gender performances in ways that ensure a possibility for a renegotiation of gender after the war is over.

Up to this point, the bulk of this essay has emphasized multiple situations in which Olanna and Kainene’s resilience manifests itself through the necessary adoption of new gender performances. Through these examples, it becomes clear that “when women (personally or as a class) are victimized by wars, they endure wars, but they do not only endure wars...women often make choices about how to cope with, engage with, and react to war(s)” (Sjoberg 260). Although these women are not physically fighting the enemy, the impact that Olanna and Kainene have on the people that surround them is irrefutable. Therefore, the women’s interactions with conflict must be analyzed within their own communal culture as well as a national Biafran culture.

Adichie’s decisions to keep men as main characters and to illustrate women and men’s interactions during times of conflict depicts the implications of war as a “wo/man palava, that is, as a problem involving both men and women and needing both sexes for resolution” (Ogunyemi 99). According to Marion Pape:

In some instances, ‘palava’ is a women’s war by which men may feel threatened; in others, it describes the re-assessment of traditions and the

shifting of gender categories; it also indicates the negotiation of a new, harmonious gender order. In other words, the scope of 'wo/men palava,' as represented by Nigerian women writers, extends from perfect harmony in gender relations to physical confrontation, even rape, from willingness to compromise indulgence and pragmatism to utter pigheadedness, from reform of the old order to a complete break with it.

(Pape 142)

Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* illustrates a "wo/men palava" by calling for the renegotiation of gender roles as a result of men and women's interactions with conflict. This renegotiation values "the vital unity of a people evolving a philosophy of life acceptable to both men and women" (Ogunyemi 121). Therefore, Adichie creates new positionalities for middleclass Igbo women, which creates discourse about the expectations of middleclass Igbo men's positionalities and the relationships between Kainene, Olanna, Odenigbo, and Richard's gender performances.

The relationship between Olanna and Odenigbo undergoes many challenges throughout the novel. Before the onset of the war, Odenigbo impregnates a girl while in a relationship with Olanna. In response to this betrayal, Olanna retreats to her flat and retaliates by having sex with Richard, Kainene's partner. However, once Olanna experiences the harsh realities of war and suspects her husband of cheating again, she simply tells Kainene, "I can't stand him. I can't stand him close to me" (Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun* 486). Olanna fails to retaliate because "[s]he worried about other things: how her periods were sparse and no longer red but a muddy

brown, how Baby's hair was falling out, how hunger was stealing the memories of the children. She was determined that their minds be kept alert; they were Biafra's future, after all" (Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun* 488). These concerns reflect Olanna's position as a self-aware woman, a mother, and a citizen of Biafra. By not leaving Odenigbo or looking for retaliation, Olanna stresses the need for healthy relationships during conflict. Similarly, Olanna recognizes the importance of the youth and their future contributions to the Biafran nation.

In addition to fostering healthy relationships within her immediate family, Olanna continually recognizes the "enemy" as human. Ogunyemi writes, "Womanism, with its myriad manifestations, is...a renaissance that aims to establish healthy relationships among people, despite ethnic, geographical, educational, gender, ethical, class, religious, military, and political differences" (123). With this in mind, it becomes clear that Olanna works to create these healthy relationships through her ability to see the Northern enemy as human and not just a demonized whole. Ugwu condemns the actions of the Northern soldiers, and Olanna remarks, "we are all capable of doing the same things to one another, really" (Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun* 222). Later in the novel, Olanna receives a letter from Mohammed, a close friend who is Hausa, and has the ability to empathize with how he must be feeling (even though he is technically the "enemy") while Odenigbo becomes blind to everything but Mohammed's national position in the war:

"She told Odenigbo about Mohammed's letter as they walked back from the village square after the meeting. 'He must be so upset about all of this. I can't imagine how he must be feeling'

'How can you say that?' Odenigbo said.

She slowed her pace and turned to him, startled. 'What's the matter?'

'What's the matter is that you are saying that a bloody Muslim Hausa man is upset! He is complicit, absolutely complicit in everything that happened to our people, so how can you say he is upset?' (Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun* 238)

Olanna repeatedly acknowledges the "enemy" as human while the Odenigbo cannot conceptualize the Northerners as real people. Therefore, by voicing her concerns about others' well being, Olanna creates discourse about the necessity of stability that can only be achieved through mutual understanding and dialogue, further stressing the need for healthy relationships between men and women during war and crisis.

The "wo/men palava," "in a sense of women interfering, shaking things up, shifting borders, extending their scope of action, threatening, quarrelling, attacking, and creating disorder," illustrates the need for men and women to be in conversation with each other to ensure the continuation of healthy relationships as well as renegotiations of gender relations (Pape 141). Both Olanna and Kainene's gender performances undergo changes that contest men's expectations. However, by illustrating the relationships between Olanna and Odenigbo and Kainene and Richard, Adichie allows for the possibility that new gender performances have the prospect of becoming accepted in the years following conflict. *Half of a Yellow Sun* illustrates the need for discourse to occur between men and women to ensure that

the women's newly adopted gender performances become realized and respected in future gender dynamics.

These experiences and alterations of gender roles aptly illustrate women's participation in war, despite remaining on the home front. The women in Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* enforce the idea that "women are not limited to being victims of wars and their aftermaths" (Sjoberg 260). They become active agents in their own survival, as well as that of their family. This agency takes the form through their decision making in dire situations, their decisions to risk their lives in fleeing or remaining at home, and even their decisions to claim political loyalties. As explained, the women in *Half of a Yellow Sun* participate in war by taking charge and making tough decisions regarding the well being of themselves and their family, which forces alterations to their gender performances and demands an acknowledgement of these alterations.

Kainene and Olanna serve as surrogates for middleclass Igbo women's experience during the Biafran War, but their experiences also demonstrate the larger need to include a history and literature of women's experience with war in order to combat the belief that women are always victims of conflict. Women can be victims of war, agents of war, or a combination of the two. They fight for their survival and the survival of those that they love. Moreover, all women's gender performances become altered by conflict because of the drastic changes that encompass war. Granted, new gender performances will manifest themselves in different ways, but women will participate in a metamorphosis nonetheless. Women are a major part of war, and their positionalities within war must be realized.

Through this novel, it becomes clear that, when faced with conflict, women become self aware, aware of their need to provide, and aware of the strength of homosocial relationships. This adoption of new gender roles begs for the renegotiation of gender between middleclass Igbo men and women during the Biafran war. By focusing on the relationships of Kainene/Richard and Olanna/Odenigbo, Adichie depicts a “wo/man palava,” stressing the need for healthy relationships between man and woman in an attempt to elicit change rather than completely condemning the whole system of gender categorization. Finally, by creating this history, Adichie sets a precedent for the recognition of women’s interactions of war.

Thus, Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun* creates discourse about culture, class, race, and gender positionalities, but the novel also underscores the dire need to acknowledge women’s experience in war in order to best combat oppressive outcomes and implications of conflict. In Adichie’s 2009 TED Talk, she states, “the single story robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different, rather than how we are similar” (Adichie, “The Danger of a Single Story”). The failure to only tell men’s war story is a failure that Adichie tries to reconcile through *Half of a Yellow Sun* and its representation of women’s participation with war. This chapter explored the effects of trauma in the form of the Biafran War on middleclass Igbo women, and it illustrated the communal consciousness created among all women within Biafra who struggled to survive. The next chapter will revisit this idea of trauma, but it will focus on the trauma of domestic abuse within Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus*. In addition,

the next chapter will analyze how the domestic sphere becomes an allegory for the national trauma's occurring during the 1990's in Nigeria.

### Chapter III

#### Gender Performance, Domestic Abuse, and Nationhood in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*

In chapter two, I discussed the implications the Biafran War had on middleclass Igbo women's gender performance and the nonhierarchical network of relationships between women that developed because of the war, as reflected in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Adichie continually explores women's interactions with trauma in her works, and this theme manifests itself within various types of traumatic conflicts, time periods, and age groups, depending on the novel or short story. In this section of the thesis, I will explore the ramifications of domestic abuse on the subjectivity of Kambili Achike in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, and I will reveal the relationship between the domestic setting of the Achike household and the national setting of Nigerian politics in order to argue that Adichie believes in the adoption of cultural hybridity within Nigeria. Therefore, this chapter will utilize postcolonial theory and feminist theory in order to best understand the ramifications of abuse on female gender performance and the larger metaphor that Adichie creates through the causal relationship between the Achike domestic situation and the political situation occurring in Nigeria. This relationship between the private and the public is the focus of Susan Andrade's *The Nation Writ Small: African Fictions and Feminisms, 1958-1988*, but the connections she makes for various fictions during that time period are still applicable to Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*. Andrade argues that women's writing in African fiction often

depicts domestic scenes but illustrates the causal relationship between the private domestic sphere and the public realm:

By illustrating the overlapping public and private realms and narrating them simultaneously, it comments on domination within the family and within the colony and points to how colonial and patriarchal relations structure not only the public realm of politics, war, and employment, but also the private one of food procurement and children's education. It suggests that colonial relations saturate all aspects of daily life and illustrates that the private realm is not immune to the violence of colonialism. (*The Nation Writ Small* 35)

Through the exploration of the changes in Kambili's gender performance and the public and private dynamics, I will expose how Adichie ultimately argues that cultural hybridity must be accepted in Nigeria in order for progress to take place. Homi Bhaba defines this hybridity as an "in-between" reality. And the inscription of this borderline existence inhabits a stillness of time and a strangeness of framing that creates the discursive 'image' at the crossroads of history and literature, bridging the home and the world" (19). Therefore, this chapter will conclude with the argument that Adichie calls for an "in-between reality" of the remnants of Western colonial practices and traditional Igbo practices in order for positive change to occur in Nigeria.

Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* explores the consequences of domestic abuse on Kambili Achike, a maturing Nigerian teenager entrapped in a home with an abusive zealot of a father, a passive mother, and an older brother who is also helpless. Like Kainene and Olanna in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Kambili's gender performance becomes dictated by her relationship with trauma—in her case, her father's physical and

psychological abuse. It is only once the psychological and physical trauma is temporarily relieved through a visit to her Aunt Ifeoma's house that Kambili is able to dictate her gender performance in her own terms rather than submit to her father's patriarchal requirements of womanhood. *Purple Hibiscus* belongs to the genre of Bildungsroman, a story that "chronicles the transition from self-ignorance to self-discovery and self-awareness" within the formative years of psychological growth (Eromosele 99). The novel follows Kambili's journey from a voiceless disciple of her father's extremist Catholic doctrine to an agent of her own emotions, thought processes, and well-being. Kambili's self-discovery is catalyzed by the time she spends in Nsukka under the influence of the surrogacy parenting of her Aunt Ifeoma, a widowed lecturer raising three kids, and Father Amadi, a local Nsukka Catholic priest. By temporarily escaping her father's abuse and militant Catholic parenting, Kambili's gender performance undergoes drastic changes, and she is able to find her voice and reinvent her identity once she enters the democratic environment.

Kambili narrates the novel, and her narration is that of an eighteen-year-old woman looking back on her journey for selfhood over the past three years. The novel is divided into four sections, each describing a different part of Kambili's journey of redefining her gender performance. The largest section depicts Kambili as a voiceless, asexual teenage girl who blindly loves her father despite his abuse. Kambili repeats the phrase, "my words would not come" throughout the first half of the novel in reference to situations where Eugene's conditioning has made her too afraid and incapable of producing language amongst her peers and within the domestic realm (Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus* 48, 97, 139). Simple tasks, such as saying the pledge at school, render Kambili

speechless because of her father's indoctrinated idea that having a voice equates to a transgression against his authority and ultimately God's authority. This inability to vocalize thoughts and emotions leaves Kambili without friends because her silence causes her peers to deem her a "backyard snob" (Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus* 51). The girls in Kambili's class believe that Kambili's silence is a consequence of her family's aristocratic position rather than a consequence of the constant threat of physical abuse that leaves "parallel marks on [her] face and ringing in [her] ears for days" (Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus* 51). Eugene's patriarchal rule and the impending threat of violence renders Kambili literally speechless, and it is not until Kambili distances herself from her father's power that she begins to find her ability to use language. The escape from Eugene's patriarchal power and entrance into democracy leads to Kambili's discovery of her subjectivity.

Eugene's reign of terror extends past stifling Kambili's voice; it additionally paralyzes her sexuality, which she should begin to discover at the age of fifteen. Through violent punishment, Eugene ensures that the female reproduction systems of Kambili and Beatrice, Kambili's mother, are always considered subordinate in relation to religion (Stobie "Gendered Bodies" 315). Eugene justifies his "persistent emotional and physical abuse [by suffusing it] with the vocabulary of love and faith" (Wallace 471). In other words, Eugene abuses his family members but justifies this abuse through excuses of love and his desire for his family to remain pure in God's eyes. This is exemplified when he beats his entire family because they allowed Kambili to break the Eucharist fast in an attempt to relieve her menstrual cramps (Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus* 102). Similarly, Beatrice asks to remain in the car when visiting a British priest after mass because of

morning sickness due to pregnancy, and Eugene meets this request with a brutal beating that results in the death of an unborn child. After this abusive episode, Eugene forces the family to pray for the forgiveness of Beatrice's sins because Eugene believes she deserved the beating and he is merely assisting God in keeping Beatrice morally pure. Thus, feminine sexuality becomes stifled in the Achike home by "Eugene's abuses [that] connect Christian fundamentalism with a fear of the body and sexuality" (Eromosele 100). Eugene relates sexuality with sin, meaning that Eugene's rigid religious beliefs negate any type of sexuality within the developing Kambili and within Beatrice. The body is a source of power for both women, a power that Eugene is threatened by and must smother in order to maintain patriarchal power. Eugene's attempt to strip away Kambili and Beatrice's sexuality means that a significant part of their gender performance is rendered mute, and they cannot fully embody womanhood without access to their own sexuality.

Under the strict living conditions engrained into her by her father, Kambili's gender performance also becomes controlled by Eugene through her physical appearance. Eugene's religious beliefs dictate Eugene's fear of the body and cause him to obscure Kambili's physical body through modest clothes and a ban of anything that could enhance beauty (Eromosele 100). Kambili is always expected to wear skirts and dresses in order to conceal her legs because any kind of "vanity was a sin" (Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus* 175). In addition, Kambili never wears makeup and has never even attempted to use makeup while living in Eugene's home. Eugene manipulates Kambili's gender performance within the psychological, sexual, and physical through his religious zealotry in order to maintain his patriarchal power.

Eugene permits Kambili and Jaja to visit their Aunt Ifeoma and cousins, Obiera, Amaka, and Chima, and the limited time that Kambili spends there is enough to catalyze her rebellion against complete acceptance of Eugene's dictatorship and to develop her personal identity as a woman, Nigerian, and Christian within her own terms. The "experiences of movement and contact with other worlds" expose Kambili to the possibilities of womanhood because she begins to see how other women, women who are not continually abused by men, perform their daily lives (Ouma, Childhood(s) in *Purple Hibiscus* 49). However, Kambili's fight for autonomy takes place gradually, and her first experiences in Nsukka are surrounded by fear, fear of her father finding out about the "sins" occurring within Ifeoma's household, as well as the fear of being away from Eugene because of the love she feels for him regardless of his abuse. Eugene's patriarchal power impacts Kambili until she is exposed to the democratic values practiced within Ifeoma's home. Kambili's gender performance becomes altered because of her exposure to role models such as Ifeoma and the "freedom to be, to do" that accompanies the environment of Ifeoma's household (Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus* 16).

In order to best understand the catalyst of Kambili's self-discovery, it becomes necessary to compare and contrast the private home environment in Enugu, where Kambili has lived her entire life under her father's control, with the private domestic environment that Ifeoma creates in Nsukka. Adichie deliberately chooses Aunt Ifeoma, a woman, to be the incendiary agent that provokes Kambili's identity awakening because Ifeoma is a self-sufficient single mother who provides for her family and parents her children through negotiation and explanation, rather than the violence that Eugene uses within his home (Kearney 140). This demonstration of independence and democratic

values exposes Kambili to a new performance of womanhood. Ifeoma becomes a feminist figure within the novel and fights for the autonomy for women through the system of belief that women must maintain elements of independence. This is illustrated when she reflects on the fact that her female students are getting married at young ages:

What is the use of a degree, they ask me, when we cannot find a job after graduation...Six girls in my first-year similar class are married, their husbands visit in Mercedes and Lexus cars every weekend, their husbands buy them stereos and textbooks and refrigerators, and when they graduate, the husbands own them and their degrees. Don't you see? (Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus* 75)

Ifeoma advocates her belief that women must have some type of independence in order to have control of their own life. Meanwhile, Eugene strips women of all autonomy within his home, and Kambili lacks any independence until moving into Ifeoma's home. The reader's first interactions with Ifeoma include a description of her "cackling, hearty" laughter and a scene in which Ifeoma tugs at Kambili's breast, remarking, "Look how fast these are growing!" (Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus* 71-72). Ifeoma refuses "Eugene's unbridled religious hegemony," and she challenges his expectations of women's gender performance, in Eugene's own home, within two pages simply through laughter and the acknowledgement that Kambili is a maturing young woman (Okuyade 250). Thus, Ifeoma immediately becomes recognizable as an example of an alternative model of the way women perform gender in Nigeria, meaning that Kambili's exposure to this new type of performance will ultimately have a significant impact on her identity and personhood.

The two domestic environments in Enugu and Nsukka drastically differ. Kambili exposes the suffocation within the confines of her home in Enugu, which is characterized by regimented schedules, violence, and the Catholic religion, by describing the barbed wire topped compound walls that surround her home and entrap the home's inhabitants (Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus* 9). These walls that Kambili describes "serve a symbolic function, identifying the disciplinary boundaries that separate, repress, and police, keeping order and marking divisions" between Eugene's immediate family with the rest of the world (Strehle 107). Eugene's patriarchal tyranny manifests itself within the home where the physical and psychological abuse occurs. Eugene's love becomes associated with pain because his beatings become justified through his excuse of saving them from eternal damnation. The children receive "love sips" from his piping hot Sunday tea. Kambili associates the sting of the tea on her tongue with Eugene's love when she says, "The tea was always too hot, always burned my tongue....But it didn't matter, because I knew that when the tea burned my tongue, it burned Papa's love into me" (Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus* 8). The private environment of Kambili's home in Enugu dictates Kambili's daily performance within and outside the home because the manipulation and authority that Eugene has perpetuated for the duration of Kambili's life becomes the only possible way for her to survive the domestic reality of her home in Enugu. Therefore, the trip to Ifeoma's home in Nsukka reveals the possibilities for an alternative way for Kambili to live life outside of Eugene's regime, and it demonstrates the freedom to love without physical pain.

Kambili and Jaja arrive at Ifeoma's "tall, bland building with peeling blue paint" engulfed by Ifeoma's garden that included "[roses] and hibiscuses and lilies and ixora

and croton [growing] side by side like a handpainted wreath” (Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus* 112). The open space of Ifeoma’s home becomes the opposite of the Achike home in Enugu. Rather than confine and shadow the inhabitants, the open spaces allow for freedom and openness (Strehle 113). Conversation and laughter fill up Ifeoma’s household, and the family litters Catholic prayers with Igbo praise songs. In contrast to Eugene’s suppression of his children’s voices, Ifeoma encourages her children to laugh and speak their minds. This is best witnessed during meal times, a daily ritual that is performed significantly different between the households of Eugene and Ifeoma. Where mealtimes in Enugu include silence and praise of Eugene’s merchandise from his factory, Kambili recognizes the freedom and happiness that occurs within Ifeoma’s house during mealtimes: “I did not say anything else until lunch was over, but I listened to every word spoken, followed every cackle of laughter and line of banter. Mostly, my cousins did the talking and Auntie Ifeoma sat back and watched them, eating slowly. She looked like a football coach who had done a good job with her team” (Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus* 120-121). Kambili is able to compare daily household actions in Nsukka with the daily household actions in Enugu, and the experiences within Ifeoma’s house create an awareness within Kambili of the oppressive characteristics of Eugene’s patriarchal rule (Kearney 141). Simple freedoms, such as discussion and banter at the dinner table, putting on lipstick, and expressing personal opinions, reveal to Kambili “the polarity between the frolicking temperament that pervades the cramped apartment in Nsukka and their forlornly existence even in the midst of everything that should make life relishing” in Enugu. (Okuyade 251). Thus, the environment within Ifeoma’s home exposes Kambili

to new possibilities that will allow her to form her identity without the constant bombardments of her father's systems of belief.

The short time that Kambili stays in Nsukka is spent observing her Aunt Ifeoma and cousins, especially Amaka, Ifeoma's daughter that is around the same age as Kambili, and experiencing Catholicism and religion through Father Amadi, the local Nsukka priest, and Papa Nwuku, Kambili's paternal grandfather. Kambili repeatedly comments on the performances of Aunt Ifeoma and Amaka by reflecting on her desire to mimic those performances. When Amaka barter with a fruit trader, simply using her voice to obtain food for her family, Kambili questions, "I wondered what it felt like to that" (Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus* 133). Kambili does not have a voice, which renders her as an observer who lets other dictate her decisions rather than an agent of her own well-being. Kambili's desire to mimic her aunt and cousin manifests itself in the kitchen, as well. After being asked to peel yams and failing to do it properly, Kambili says, "I watched the measured movement of her hand and the increasing length of the peel, wishing I could apologize, wishing I knew how to do it right" (Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus* 134). The kitchen becomes the site of Kambili's discovery of language when she defends herself against Amaka's criticism with Ifeoma's urging to defend herself. Madeline Hron notes, "It is only when Kambili herself learns to cook and prepare traditional Igbo dishes that she breaks away from the fabricated sweetness of her childhood and gains agency as a woman" (34). Thus, the beginning of Kambili's time spent in Nsukka marks the period where she observes the difference between Ifeoma and Amaka's performances as women and her personal performance as a woman, and it is in Nsukka where she first uses her voice, the initial step in gaining agency.

After a few days of observing her cousin and aunt, Kambili begins to attempt to copy the performances of the two women. Physically trying to mimic the two, Kambili uses Amaka's lipstick and stares into the mirror with curiosity (Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus* 174). In addition, Kambili wears shorts for the first time, and Father Amadi comments, "You have good legs for running," which makes Kambili look away because she "had never heard anything like that before" (Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus* 176). Comments such as these cause Kambili to develop a sexual attraction to Father Amadi, an emotion she could have never experienced under Eugene's tyranny. Kambili begins to bloom as a sexual being during this time. Moreover, these sexual and physical performances of womanhood that Kambili attempts in Nsukka allow her to become "well on her way to emancipation" because her identity reformation can only occur once "she becomes comfortable with her own body and conscious of that of others" (Eromosele 101).

These physical and sexual metamorphoses are accompanied by a psychological metamorphosis. For the first time in her life, Kambili's "mouth performs almost all the functions associated with it. She smiles, talks, cries, laughs, jokes and sings" (Okuyade 160). She begins to become an individual. Moreover, Kambili escapes the mental prison Eugene has confined her within, and she begins to create individual opinions and feelings for issues that were previously dictated by Eugene. Kambili begins to elude Eugene's strict Catholic beliefs when she realizes the beauty in Papa-Nnukwu's morning prayer rituals, rituals that Eugene condemned as acts of sins by heathens and Pagans (Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus* 167-169). Although Kambili does not believe in the traditionalist beliefs that Papa-Nnukwu practices, she respects the beauty and dedication of Papa-Nnukwu's spirituality, signifying "a curiously healthy alliance between traditional society as

represented by Papa-Nnukwu, and modern society as represented by Ifeoma” (Kearney 140). This acceptance of her grandfather and the freedom to choose this acceptance manifests itself in the painting of the grandfather that Amaka gifts to Kambili once Papa-Nnukwu has died and Kambili returns to Enugu. Eugene’s discovery of the painting leads to the horrific beating of Kambili because she has “retrieved her voice, [and] she is unwilling to observe her father truncate the stable transition of her development, which the painting will help her realize even within the circumscribed radius of her father’s walls” (“Dethroning the Infallible Father” 161). Kambili refuses to passively allow her father to control her. Therefore, after spending time within Ifeoma’s democratic home, she occupies the position of a “bolder gendered body” that uses that body, despite the abuse of her father, to preserve her newfound identity and voice (“Gendered Bodies” 319).

So far, this essay has focused on the private realm of familial relationships that surrounded Kambili before and after her reformation of identity. In addition to these relationships between private domestic spaces, *Purple Hibiscus* also illustrates a relationship between the domestic realm and the national realm that reflects the (then) current state of politics in Nigeria. This relationship is explored in Susan Andrade’s *The Nation Writ Small*, which links African feminist writers’ depictions of domestic life within a larger political context, making “it possible to read the realms of intimate domestic life as not merely micro-political or insignificant but as interlocked with the macro-political, as that on which it depends” (*Nation Writ Small* 35). In other words, it becomes necessary to analyze how political life impacts domestic life and how domestic life impacts political life. The setting of *Purple Hibiscus* resides in the domestic realm, meaning that the familial dynamics in Eugene and Ifeoma’s homes “depict the

consolidation and dispersal of social power” in ways that reflect larger national power dynamics (*Nation Writ Small* 34). *Purple Hibiscus* focuses on two types of power relations—Eugene’s patriarchal dictatorship and Ifeoma’s democratic republic.

Therefore, by analyzing the private domestic spheres in the novel, it becomes possible to interrogate the larger political message that Adichie conveys.

Although Eugene is a patriarchal dictator within the home, he becomes a voice that resists the military dictatorships within Nigerian politics during this time. Adichie depicts scenes of domestic horror while simultaneously illustrating the turmoil of Nigerian politics in the 1990s. The 1990s in Nigeria were characterized by unstable systems of government, military coups, and a false hope that new leaders would lead to a new democracy (Falola 190-200). Eugene fights for this democracy by writing in *The Standard*, a major Nigerian newspaper, to criticize the current state of the Nigerian government. Eugene takes great risks to speak against the current government, yet he does not practice democracy within his own home. Kambili reveals the resistant voice of Eugene when she discusses the content of the newspaper that he runs:

[T]he *Standard* had written many stories about the cabinet ministers who stashed money in foreign bank accounts, money meant for paying teachers’ salaries and building roads. But what we Nigerians needed was not soldiers ruling us, what we needed was a renewed democracy. *Renewed Democracy*. (Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus* 25)

This summation of the *Standard*’s content depicts Eugene’s desire to expose the faults and shortcomings of the Nigerian government in an attempt to give voice to the Nigerian people struggling under the government’s oppression. Similarly, Eugene believes in using

his voice to resist the government, which is exemplified when he exposes the truth about the government's brutal murder of Nwankiti Ogechi (Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus* 201). However, within the home, Eugene strips his family of all autonomy and takes their voice away from them, a direct contradiction to his public fight for democracy for the Nigerian public. Adichie juxtaposes Eugene's public appearance of altruism with the brutal abuse that takes place within the confines of the Achike home. Thus, the domestic sphere mimics the current conditions of the political sphere. Adichie parallels the political tumult in Nigeria during this time with the psychological and physical abuse Eugene employs to retain patriarchal dominance within his home. The home becomes a microcosm for the national. Domestically, Kambili becomes the resistor to patriarchal dictatorship of her father, an authority figure who strips her of autonomy, voice, and self. While, nationally, Eugene becomes a Nigerian individual who provides resistance through his voice in the *Standard* against the oppressive military governments that prevent democracy from occurring.

Adichie intertwines violence, voicelessness, and gender within the domestic sphere, further conveying a larger message in regard to politics and the current situation in Nigeria. Eugene's tyranny and Beatrice's passivity represent the (then) current state of the majority of the Nigerian people (Hron 34). Adichie subliminally includes references in the novel to violence occurring within Nigeria, such as "bloody coups" (Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus* 24), public executions (Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus* 33), and market women being whipped by soldiers (Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus* 44), simultaneously as she illustrates brutal acts of violence occurring in the home (Hron 34). After the instance of a market woman being whipped, Kambili reflects, "I had not seen her face, but I felt that I

knew her, that I had always known her. I wished I could have gone over and helped her up, cleaning the red mud from her wrapper” (Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus* 44). At this point in the novel, Kambili has no voice, and she is merely a bystander. She watches the woman get whipped and can relate to the violence, but her own voicelessness prevents her from resisting authority’s abuse of power. Like Kambili, the Nigerian public at this time does not exercise its voice because of the string of dictatorships, and the violence that accompanied them, that followed national independence and the Biafran War.

Anthony Oha comments on Adichie’s political message within *Purple Hibiscus*: “Adichie sees the African people as sufferers of bad governance due to many years of military rulership...Political freedom seems a long sought-after need of the Nigerian people” (203). Like the Nigerian people, she becomes subjected to a dictatorship, in the form of her father’s patriarchal position within the home, and freedom from her father’s oppressions the only way her identity will grow. Thus, Adichie illustrates, through the juxtaposition of Eugene’s household and Ifeoma’s household in which Kambili reaches her potential and discovers her identity, that political freedom can only be achieved through resistance to “patriarchal repression” while gaining “a deeper understanding of traditional culture” and its relationship to colonial aftermaths (Hron 34).

Adichie illustrates the dire need for patriarchal resistance in Nigeria through Kambili’s journey of emancipation. Moreover, she uses Amaka as the model of femininity for women to strive for within the Nigerian public. Amaka is described as a “rare breed of the new generation of youths. She is creative, accommodating, honest, outspoken and a dogged fighter” (Oha 205). Amaka believes in her Nigerian heritage and embraces it, yet she still welcomes certain parts of Nigerian life that originated from

patriarchal and colonial rule. This is best exemplified when Amaka desires to be confirmed within the Catholic Church but refuses to choose an English name for confirmation (Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus* 204). However, unlike Amaka, Kambili does not begin as a model of resistance for the Nigerian people. Rather, Kambili becomes a symbol for the *possibility* of escaping patriarchal tyranny even though she begins life oppressed. Although she begins voiceless, she escapes Eugene's abuse and recreates her identity with the help of Ifeoma and Amaka. On the third page of the novel, Kambili questions, "How many of us have stood up for the truth?" (Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus* 5). By the end of the novel, Kambili defies her father by using her body to defend the painting of Papa-Nnukwu. In other words, Kambili's defense is a recognition of the truth that her grandfather is not a "heathen," but he is a traditionalist worthy of being loved. Adichie's use of Kambili and Amaka reflects her opinion that women must help other women and the voiceless to escape patriarchal rule and that there is a possibility of escaping this patriarchal dominance despite the oppressive confines many people believe they are entrapped in.

In order to fight this patriarchy, Adichie believes that the Nigerian people must embrace cultural hybridity, as symbolized by the purple hibiscus found in Ifeoma's garden. *Purple Hibiscus* illustrates the "crossroads" that the Nigerian people are faced with by depicting the struggle between traditional Igbo practices, such as the traditional religious beliefs of Papa-Nnukwu, and the remnants of practices established by the English when they colonized Nigeria, such as Catholicism and a reverence for all things "Western" (Baba 19). Therefore, the hybridity that Adichie encourages embraces certain aspects of both traditional Igbo practices and Western practices brought by the

colonizers, and it shuns extremist examples of either. This is best exemplified by the image of the hibiscus throughout the novel.

The reader learns of the red hibiscuses that litter the Achike yard within the first chapter of the novel (Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus* 9). Hibiscuses, which are most prevalently found in red or orange, do not conform to the normative appearance of hibiscuses when found in Ifeoma's garden because they are purple—a hybrid species of the hibiscus. Jaja quickly becomes attached to this specie of the plant, as it represents the time spent in Nsukka, and Ifeoma gifts him with purple hibiscus seeds to plant within his own yard. Kambili directly states within the first chapter that Ifeoma's "experimental purple hibiscus" is "rare, fragrant with the undertones of freedom, a different kind of freedom...A freedom to be, to do" (Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus* 16). This freedom that Kambili references originated in Ifeoma's household. In Kambili's eyes it is the hybridity—the Igbo praise songs during Catholic worship, the belief that women must have independence within marriage, the simple acceptance of other cultures and ways of living—within Ifeoma's household that equates to the purple hibiscus. Adichie stresses the idea that "Kambili only grows and flourishes like the purple hibiscus, when she learns to draw on her roots and cultivate her hybridity" (Hron 34). Therefore, *Purple Hibiscus* illustrates the fact that both the individual citizen and the country as a whole, must "examine within themselves the correct approaches to life" in order to gain this freedom (Hron 34).

The novel concludes with Eugene dead, Jaja in jail for his mother's crimes, and Ifeoma's family relocated to the United States. Yet, the ending remains hopeful because the patriarchal tyranny is gone, Jaja protects his mother, and Kambili is able to preserve

her voice despite Ifeoma's family's relocation. The last two paragraphs reveal the optimism for both Kambili and the nation:

We'll plant new orange trees in Abba when we come back, and Jaja will plant purple hibiscus, too, and I'll plant ixora so we can suck the juice of the flowers." I am laughing. I reach out and place my arm around Mama's shoulder and she leans toward me and smiles.

Above, clouds like dyed cotton wool hang low, so low I feel I can reach out and squeeze the moisture from them. The new rains will come down soon.

(Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus* 307)

Kambili laughs and Beatrice smiles, two actions that the two women never performed in the beginning of the novel. Moreover, the new rains will allow the purple hibiscus to spread and cultivate within the Achike yard, symbolizing the spread and cultivation of hybridity and resistance to patriarchal culture within the future. The freedom and voice that Kambili gains by the end of the novel reflects her "resilience, adaptability, courage, and readiness to engage in self-reflection" (Kearney 143). The cultural hybridity that Kambili achieves allows her the possibility of a future, a possibility that Adichie believes Nigeria can have if the people embrace cultural hybridity like Kambili.

In texts taking place in postcolonial nations, it becomes easy to only view binaries—white/black, Catholicism/Traditionalism, masculine dominance/feminine subordination, etc.; however, *Purple Hibiscus* "resists any simple oppositional binaries but rather is constantly reevaluating and renegotiating them, by repeatedly drawing attention to disparate points of view" (Hron 32). Adichie achieves this when she compares Kambili's family in Enugu with Kambili's surrogate family in Nsukka. Where

Eugene's home fosters extremist Catholicism, a patriarchal family dynamic, and a belief that whiteness is superior to Nigerian blackness, Ifeoma's household fosters cultural hybridity and encourages acceptance and a belief that many aspects of Nigerian culture are worth reclaiming and certain aspects of colonial culture are worth keeping. This fusion of binaries becomes a major influence on Kambili's identity formation. Adichie continually attempts to discourage the dominance of binaries and instead illustrates the positive possibilities of accepting traditional and modern practices of both the traditionalists and colonizers.

In conclusion, Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* illustrates the ill effects of domestic abuse on women's gender performance and identity cultivation. The autocratic patriarchy within the Achike home prevents Kambili from discovering her subjectivity. It is not until Kambili escapes her father's abuse and finds refuge in the democratic space within Ifeoma's household that she develops agency. While Kambili is in Ifeoma's home, she discovers the possibility of cultural hybridity, a concept that Adichie believes must be accepted for both Kambili's self-improvement and the improvement of the public. Kambili Achike begins as a voiceless, subordinate teenager, and she ends the novel as an agent of her own being because she embraces the hybridity of Ifeoma's household. By focusing on the domestic space, Adichie connects the narrative family with a larger narrative of Nigerian identity. Like Kambili, the only way that the Nigerian public will escape the oppression from their government is through the discovery of their voice to demand autonomy and democracy. Although Eugene is a dictator within his home, his use of voice in the *Standard* allows him to become a mode of resistance within the Nigerian public. Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* challenges the Nigerian public to demand

voice and adopt cultural hybridity to develop the nation as a whole and personal subjectivity. The next chapter of this thesis will continue with the concepts of the individual, nation, and voice by focusing on the use of orality within African culture and its importance in the healing process after experiencing trauma.

## Chapter IV

### Storytelling as Healing in Two of Adichie's Novels

While chapter three of this thesis focused on Kambili's discovery of her subjectivity through voice and the relationship between the private and the public sphere of life in Eugene Achike's household, this chapter will explore the importance of orality and the centrality of storytelling to the health and wellbeing of both male and female characters in Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Purple Hibiscus* and the Igbo people as a whole. In order to accomplish this, this chapter will utilize an aspect of trauma theory outlined in Zoe Norridge's "Comparing Pain: Theoretical Explorations of Suffering and Working Towards the Particular" and certain aspects of Mieke Bal's narratological theory as discussed by Aghogho Akpome's "Focalisation and Polyvocality in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*." Norridge uses her chapter to combat Elaine Scarry's theory outlined in *The Body Pain*, which argues that pain can be "compared across geographies and literatures because comparison serves to reveal universally held truths" (Norridge 212). Norridge instead argues that pain is a "culturally specific experience which is inherently subjective," and it should be analyzed using "overarching questions and frameworks within which people in pain express and explore their experience" (213). This chapter will argue that orality and storytelling become the primary method for the Igbo characters in Adichie's novels to reestablish themselves after trauma and commence the healing process because of the cultural importance of

orality and storytelling. The analysis of traumatic events and their relationship with the characters will be possible by recognizing the methods of narration in both novels, largely concentrating on the focalization and polyvocality that occur within *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Purple Hibiscus*. Bal defines a focaliser “as the narrator’s delegate that influences the way narrative content is perceived by the reader” (Akpome 26). The multiple focalisers within each novel expose the reader to a multiplicity of voices and perspectives. In other words, the polyvocality within *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Purple Hibiscus* reveals a communal consciousness of trauma. The narrative techniques that Adichie employs allows for this analysis by depicting multiple characters’ experiences and their ideologies surrounding those experiences. This profusion of narrative voices exposes storytelling as the culturally specific mode of healing after trauma because various characters utilize orature or scriptotherapy to heal despite the characters’ varying ideologies and various interactions with trauma.

In her 2009 Ted Talk, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie calls herself a storyteller and relates stories with power: “How they are told, who tells them, when they’re told, how many stories are told, are really dependent on power” (“The Danger of a Single Story”). Adichie believes that white Western literature has created a single story of Africa and has failed to recount accurate depictions of African reality. Moreover, she believes that the African people must demand power through voice and share the realities of the African story. Chinua Achebe’s *Anthills of the Savannah* shares similar sentiments on the importance of storytelling in African culture when Achebe enunciates the importance of storytelling through the Abazon elder’s speech, which declares, “it is only the story [that] can continue beyond the war and the warrior...It is the story, not the others, that saves

our progeny from blundering like blind beggars into the spikes of the cactus fence. The story is our escort; without it, we are blind...it is the story that owns us and directs us” (Achebe 114). Both Adichie’s TED Talk and Achebe’s *Anthills of the Savannah* reveal the authors’ belief that storytelling is the only way for the African continent to shed the single story created by white Westerners and to halt the oppressive regimes in African governments. The African people must use their voices to create their power, and they must continue to tell their stories in order to combat the present and preserve the African story.

African societies have practiced storytelling and employed orality for centuries in order to convey and impart their cultures and their histories to other Africans, outsiders, and new generations of youth. The permeation of African culture has relied on oral communication and storytelling, signifying that Africa’s utilization of the oral is the “vector for the production of social life, religious beliefs, and the constant constituting and reconstituting of society, ideology, and aesthetics” (Gunner 1). Moreover, the origin of African literature manifests itself within the practice of orature, which highlights the importance of stories in the forms of chants, poems, and songs that are transmitted through verbal means and realized through performance and audience. Thus, the antecedents of African literature in the form of orality “[remain] predominant and [serve] as a central paradigm for various kinds of expression on the continent” (Irele 11). By analyzing *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Purple Hibiscus*, it becomes apparent that the oral transmission of experiences remains a critical element of modern and contemporary African society. In the case of each of these novels, orally sharing the story of a traumatic event serves as a method of healing and allows the orator to initiate the process of

recovery. The oral recognition of traumatic experiences serves as a signifier of the characters' acknowledgment of the drastic event that has disrupted their lives, and it allows them to "release unconscious emotions and tensions by recalling trauma and reliving the experience" (Atieh 4). Through the narrative techniques of each novel, Adichie allows the reader to witness many different characters' participation in the cultural practice of storytelling, or, as in Richard's case in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, not participate in the act of storytelling. Therefore, the reader is able to witness the importance of the culturally specific practice of orally conveying a traumatic experience to institute the healing process.

In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Adichie chooses to utilize an omniscient narrator that directly focuses the novel through Ugwu, Olanna, and Richard's perspectives and indirectly focalizes the novel through Odenigbo and Kainene's perspectives. This process of narration is defined as focalization, and it illustrates how each of these characters' ideologies influences the perspective of the novel because each section is focalized through one of them, meaning that the narrator focuses on the consciousness of one of these characters for each section. This provides the illusion that the direct focalisers are narrating the story, but the narrator is actually an anonymous third person narrator. The omniscient narrator simply bases the narrative perspective off of one of the primary focalizer's ideologies to influence the way that the reader interacts with the text. Meanwhile, the indirect focalisers are the characters that influence the primary characters psychologically and ideologically in a way that has influence on the cognitive focalizing functions of the primary focalizers (Akpome 28). Kainene and Odenigbo become significant indirect focalisers because of their positions as life partners with Richard and

Olanna, respectively. Kainene and Olanna also share a familial relationship, and Odenigbo's serves the role as master to Ugwu. Because of these subject positions, they have an impact on the ideologies and decisions of Olanna, Richard, and Ugwu, which in turn has an effect on the way that the reader perceives each section.

The utilization of an omniscient narrator focalizing the narrative through various characters creates a sense of polyvocality. This polyvocality allows the reader to hear a multiplicity of voices commenting on several aspects of the same event, which, in the case of *Half of a Yellow Sun*, is the Biafran War. This creates a composite consciousness of the Biafran War (Ouma, "Composite Consciousness" 16). Moreover, this polyvocality allows for the "various processes of archiving that involve personae of different ages, classes, gender and even races" (Ouma, "Composite Consciousness" 26). Therefore, each character remembers their experiences with the war in different ways and the oral voicing of their story contributes to the discourse surrounding the Biafran War, which eventually accumulates into a national and ethnic hi(story) of the Biafran War. This discourse and oral transmission of experiences is the culturally constructed method of healing because of the significance of orature within African society. Storytelling becomes a method for personal healing but also a method of national healing. The multiplicity of voices unites to form the composite consciousness that results in the historical narrative of a nation. Therefore, creating discourse and utilizing voice becomes a mode of remembering and recounting the Biafran War, which allows the nation to begin to heal after the traumatic event.

During the weeks leading to ethnic conflict and once war ensues, the characters in *Half of a Yellow Sun* begin to experience the realities of war, particularly hunger, terror,

and violence. Adichie chooses to primarily portray the interactions with war on the home front rather than the warfront. The horrors of war become an actuality, and each focaliser experiences a major traumatic event outside of the basic trauma of experiencing daily life during war. It is not until “dissociation from trauma is initiated through the reverse articulation of verbal or written testimony to an empathetic listener or reader” that the healing process can begin for the characters (Atieh 4). For Olanna, the healing process is initiated through verbal communication and oral storytelling while Ugwu experiences therapeutic relief from the process of writing his story. Richard attempts to heal from his trauma by the sharing of the Igbo story, but his cultural position as a white Englishman renders him as an outsider who is unable to participate in the culturally specific process of sharing one’s story to initiate regeneration. Each character interacts with their traumatic experience in their own way and chooses to tell their story through various means; regardless of the method, the process of storytelling must occur in order to begin the healing process for the Igbo characters.

Wartime struggles greatly impact Olanna, but her most traumatic encounter with the war occurs before war is actually declared when she comes into contact with the recently slaughtered bodies of her aunt and uncle. The narrator recounts the scene: “Uncle Mbaezi lay facedown in an ungainly twist, legs splayed. Something creamy-white oozed through the large gash on the back of his head. Aunty Ifeka lay on the veranda. The cuts on her naked body were smaller, dotting her arms and legs like slightly parted red lips” (Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun* 186). Olanna manages to escape a similar fate and returns to Nsukka by a train filled with others fleeing the scene. While on the train, Olanna sits next to a woman who carries a calabash bowl that contains a “little girl’s head

with the ashy-gray skin and the braided hair and rolled-back eyes and open mouth” (Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun* 188). These traumas temporarily render Olanna speechless and immobile. However, she takes the first step in the healing process the same night that she arrives home after the traumatic events—sharing the story of her experience. Olanna chooses to recount her horrors to Odenigbo: “She described the vaguely familiar clothes on the headless bodies in the yard, the still-twitchy fingers on Uncle Mbaezi’s hand, the rolled-back eyes of the child’s head in the calabash and the odd skin tone—a flat, sallow gray, like a poorly wiped blackboard—of all the corpses that lay in the yard” (Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun* 196). Olanna explicitly tells her story, and this initial act of verbalizing her experience and utilizing such descriptive detail is the only thing necessary to initiate the healing process. Since she verbalized what she saw while in Kano, Odenigbo now has the power to retell her story, which is exactly what he chooses to do when Olanna’s parents, Kainene, and Richard arrive after the trauma. Odenigbo becomes the “other who can hear the anguish of one’s memories and thus affirm and recognize their realness” (Atieh 4). This affirmation serves as a method of healing and allows for the experience with trauma to be repeated and verbalized through Odenigbo if Olanna chooses not to verbalize the experience after her initial recognition of the trauma.

The experience that Olanna faces in Kano continues to haunt her throughout the novel. However, Olanna begins to recover after the experience because of her verbal acknowledgment of what occurred, and she becomes a wartime schoolteacher in an attempt to contribute to the Biafran war efforts. The importance of traumatic testimony reveals itself when Olanna recounts the description of the child’s head in the calabash bowl to Ugwu:

[She] realized that she clearly remembered how [the child's hair] was plaited and she began to describe the hairstyle, how some of the braids fell across the forehead. Then she described the head itself, the open eyes, the graying skin. Ugwu was writing as she spoke, and 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, and so she told him all she remembered about the train full of people who had cried and shouted and urinated on themselves. (Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun* 512)

Olanna recognizes the “larger purpose” of conveying such a traumatic encounter with war. By telling her story, she contributes to the larger history of the Biafran experience with the civil war. Moreover, the more she tells her story, the closer she becomes to recovery.

Richard's most traumatic encounter with the war occurs when he is at the airport in Kano. He chats with an Igbo customs officer at the airport, and the two men form a bond over Richard's ability to speak Igbo, despite being a white Westerner. However, Northern soldiers invade the airport, and Richard's recently made friend is murdered right in front of Richard because of his identity as an Igbo man. The man's “chest blew open, a splattering red mass” (Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun* 192). Richard witnesses this brutality and believes that visiting the slain customs agent's family to relay the story of their son's death is the best way to initiate his recovery from witnessing such a horrific event. Richard believes that simply going to the family's home and recounting their son's interaction with the Hausa soldiers will remedy both his and the family's pain. However, Richard ignores cultural customs and fails to bring condolence gifts because:

[He] had been caught up in himself, in thinking that his coming was enough, that he would be the magnanimous angel who brought the last hours of their son to them and, by doing so, would assuage their grief and redeem himself...He got up to leave, knowing that nothing had changed for him either; he would feel the same way he had felt since he returned from Kano” (Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun* 207-208).

Richard fails to initiate the healing process through storytelling because he is not Igbo, despite all of his attempts, and he cannot express and feel the trauma of the Biafran War the same way that Nigerians and Biafrans do. He fails to assuage his grief and the customs agent’s family’s and simultaneously commits a cultural faux pas. Richard will always be an outsider despite his attempts to become a part of the Biafran culture, and he must heal from witnessing the brutal murder of the customs agent in his own terms rather than attempt to mimic the Igbo characters’ recovery processes.

Zoë Norridge explains the culturally specific interactions with trauma in her essay "Comparing Pain: Theoretical Explorations of Suffering and Working Towards the Particular," and she delineates the significant differences of expressing and experiencing pain based off of geographic locations and cultures. Norridge’s essay provides an explanation as to why Richard is unable to experience and recover from trauma in the same ways as the Igbo characters. Richard is a white man from England who travels to Nigeria because of his fascination with Igbo-Ukwu art and his desire to write a book about the “complicated art of lost-wax casting during the time of the Viking raids”; therefore, he does not have any significant cultural, familial, or historical connections with Biafra, no matter how hard he works to perfect the Igbo language or create a sense

of Biafran nationalism within himself (Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun* 141). Norridge comments on the cultural specificities of pain when she says, “[p]ain here is explored both as an essential part of being a human being and as a culturally specific experience which is inherently subjective...[we should look] at overarching questions and frameworks within which people in pain express and explore their experience” (Norridge, “Comparing Pain” 213). In other words, Richard’s culture, a culture that does not rely on orature, dictates the way he expresses pain and the way he heals from a traumatic experience. The African characters’ cultural history of orality dictates their need to tell their story in order to initiate recovery, resulting in a significant difference in recovery methods for Richard and Igbo characters because of cultural histories and practices.

This culturally specific utilization of storytelling can also be examined through Richard’s attempt to write a novel about the culture that created “the magnificent roped pot” (Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun* 62). Amy Novak credits Richard’s failure to produce a novel about the Igbo people to his inability to shed his “colonial privilege” which solidifies his position as a permanent “colonial observer” (40). Richard cannot tell the story of the Biafrans because he will never be a Biafran, and, therefore, his position as a white male from England will always impose upon the true Biafran story. Therefore, Richard’s healing process from trauma cannot be produced through storytelling or orality, and he admits this by the end of the story. As he puts it, “[t]he war isn’t my story to tell, really,” and Ugwu assumes the responsibility of telling the story of the Igbo people and their experiences with the Biafran War (Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun* 530).

Ugwu chronicles the trauma of colonialism and the Biafran War on the Biafran and Nigerian people through the metatext of his book, “The World Was Silent When We

Died.” The metatext highlights the importance of polyvocality and orality within the creation of Biafran history. Each portion of Ugwu’s book that the reader encounters creates a snapshot of various aspects of Biafran history focalized through multiple characters. For example, the first summation of Ugwu’s book includes the story of the child’s head in the calabash bowl that Olanna vocalizes to Ugwu. Moreover, certain historical events that Ugwu elaborates on can be attributed to the historical incidents that Ugwu overheard while working for Odenigbo. Thus, the book that Ugwu writes is “formed from ‘a diversity of social speech types and ‘a diversity of individual voices’” (Ngwira 49). This allows for the multiplicity of voices to create the history of the Biafran nation, a nation that suffered unexplainable amounts of pain after the violence and starvation that occurred because of the war. Therefore, Ugwu’s book serves “as an act of redemption, expiation and healing” for the Biafran nation because it creates a composite national consciousness of the Biafran War (Ouma, “Composite Consciousness” 17).

The participation and observance of the rape of a barmaid serves as Ugwu’s most traumatic encounter within the novel. Dreams of the rape haunt Ugwu:

In that grey space between dreaming and daydreaming, where he controlled most of what he imagined, he saw the bar, smelt the alcohol, and heard the soldiers saying ‘Target Destroyer’, but it was not the bar girl that lay with her back on the floor, it was Eberechi. He woke up hating the image and hating himself. (Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun* 497)

Guilt floods Ugwu’s consciousness until he decides to continue writing. The more Ugwu writes, the less often he has nightmares about his wartime trauma. Therefore, the act of storytelling in the form of writing becomes Ugwu’s source of healing. This means that

“The World Was Silent While We Died” becomes a “cultural memory” that includes the “composite memories that span the autobiographical, individual and collective” (Ouma, “Composite Consciousness” 27). Adichie works to illustrate the importance of collective memory through the utilization of the metatext, but she also attempts to highlight the importance of storytelling for individual and national self-healing after traumatic encounters.

There is no doubt that the three main focalizers in this novel encounter horrific events. However, it is only Olanna and Ugwu who are able to initiate recovery through storytelling because of the culturally specific qualities of orature and the African healing process. Richard remains an outsider and must combat his traumatic experience separately from the Igbo characters. By focalizing *Half of a Yellow Sun* through characters of a variety of genders, races, and ages, Adichie creates a complex web of the larger national story of the Biafran War. Through Ugwu’s book, each character contributes to the larger national history that will continue to be told in order to heal from the massacre of the Igbo people during the war. This story of the domestic and wartime horrors that the characters face continues to be told through storytelling, with *Half of a Yellow Sun* as an example of such storytelling that reveals the ongoing healing process of the Igbo people that is still occurring in contemporary Nigeria. Adichie also stresses the importance of storytelling within African culture in her novel *Purple Hibiscus*.

The setting of *Purple Hibiscus* is about twenty years after the conclusion of the Biafran War. Yet, political instability and abuse of governmental powers saturates Nigerian society. Although the nation begins to heal from the horrors of the Biafran War, new traumas manifest themselves both nationally and domestically. The vicious cycle of

military coups overthrowing the government continually repeats itself, and political authorities abuse their powers, resulting in constant political turmoil in the form of violence, a poor economic structure, and a dissatisfied public. This national chaos reflects the domestic situations of many household structures during this time. For example, the Achike household mirrors the structure of the government during the early 1990's—a dictatorship that reinforces complete patriarchal control. This patriarchal control attempts to stifle any kind of oppositional voice, rendering the ability to tell one's story impossible. The characters within the novel must combat this patriarchal control in order to use their voice, which will in turn signify their ability to recover from the trauma occurring within the nation and the domestic sphere.

*Purple Hibiscus* is divided into four sections: “Breaking Gods: Palm Sunday,” (1-16) “Speaking with our Spirits: Before Palm Sunday,” (17-253) “The Pieces of God: After Palm Sunday,” (255-291) and “A Different Silence: The Present” (293-307). Kambili is the narrator, and the novel begins in medias res with Kambili reflecting on Jaja's refusal to submit to their father's authority. In the second section, Kambili flashes back to the time when both her and her brother's voices were silent because of the impending threat of physical and psychological abuse within Eugene's home. Their voices were only discovered through the physical removal of themselves from Eugene's home and relocation to the democratic household of their Aunty Ifeoma. The stifling of voice within the Achike household reflects the “authoritarian dominance in the domestic sphere [which] becomes a shadow of the dictatorial regime of the military at the national level” (Udumukwu 190). Thus, it becomes necessary for the Achike children to break this patriarchal dominance and find their voice in order to tell their story and begin to heal

from the trauma they have faced from their abusive father. Similarly, the nation must fight the authority of their oppressive government to begin to heal from the violence and turmoil that has occurred at the hands of the bloody military regimes and corrupt political officials.

The narrator of the novel is Kambili, but the primary focalisers in the novel are herself, Ifeoma, and Eugene because each character contributes a significant perspective and ideology within the novel. I have chosen to concentrate on the use of voice by Eugene and Kambili to explore how their utilization of orality and storytelling initiates the healing processes after national trauma and individual trauma, respectively. Much like in *Half of a Yellow Sun* the characters in *Purple Hibiscus* occupy a culturally dictated subject position, and cultural traditions and histories govern how they heal from trauma. Kela Nnarka Francis's "Approaching Literature from an African Worldview: Ritual Potency of the Masking Process in *Purple Hibiscus*" comments on the importance of the relationship between the Igbo community and an individual's utilization of voice: when a character "regresses into a silence [it] suggests her emotional isolation from her Igbo community" (28). Therefore, the employment of voice and the practice of storytelling is what unites the Igbo community, and it becomes necessary to use voice to participate in the community and heal both as an individual and a member of the larger Igbo public.

Kambili focalizes the novel through her perspective and her interactions with Eugene's extreme physical and psychological abuse. By witnessing the abuse through Kambili's perspective, it becomes clear that Eugene's patriarchal control has rendered Kambili's silent. This becomes obvious within the first ten pages when Kambili witnesses the anger of an enraged Eugene, and she says, "I meant to say I am sorry Papa

broke your figurines, but the words that came out were, “I’m sorry your figurines broke, Mama”” (Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus* 10). Kambili is unable to vocalize her true thoughts—that her abusive father lost his temper and broke her mother’s figurines. She is incapable of using her voice to condemn her father because he controls her voice as the patriarchal dictator within their home. Moreover, the silence that Kambili perpetuates encroaches on her ability to form bonds between other members of the Igbo community, such as the girls in her class. A classmate tells Kambili, “If you stay and talk to people, maybe it will make them know that you are really not a snob” (Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus* 51). Kambili becomes ostracized from her school community because her father stifles her voice, a critical component of forming relationships. By focalizing the novel through Kambili, the reader clearly witnesses Kambili’s inability to voice her true opinions because Kambili’s thoughts often convey completely different intentions than her actual vocal performance. Orality and vocality unite the Igbo people, but Eugene’s control renders Kambili silent in all aspects of her life. This silence masks the extreme abuse that Kambili faces from her patriarchal father within the domestic realm.

In order to recover from this abuse, Kambili must find her voice and tell the story of her trauma. Kambili’s discovery of voice becomes clear through Kambili’s focalizing the novel through her own perspective because the reader witnesses the formulation of her personal ideologies, rather than the ideologies Eugene forces upon her. The first time that Kambili vocalizes her trauma is after Eugene’s extreme beating sends her to the hospital and Amaka asks her if Eugene was responsible for the brutality. The simple admission of her father’s abuse opens Kambili up to the possibility of recovery. She begins to use her voice. Kambili overhears her mother and aunt talking, and she asks

Amaka a question, which becomes the first time Kambili uses her voice to express curiosity within the novel. Kambili recognizes this newfound voice and notes, “I knew I would not have asked before. I would have wondered about it, but I would not have asked” (Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus* 223). Kambili’s healing begins immediately after admitting her trauma. She begins to use her voice and gain a position within the community of her family.

The last section of the novel, “A Different Silence: The Present” (293-307) that occurs in the present is the most obvious manifestation of Kambili’s voice. Kambili emerges as “a subject in her own right who is capable of taking decisions and carrying out responsibilities” (Udumukwu 200). Kambili’s agency allows her to become the leader of the family. Jaja is awaiting release from prison, and her mother has become controlled by nervousness. Yet, Kambili and her mother carry “the same new peace, the same hope, concrete for the first time” (Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus* 297). This agency that Kambili exhibits during the last section is what allows her to become the narrator of the novel and a primary focalizer. By telling her story, Kambili initiates healing and becomes a part of the Igbo community. The novel ends on a hopeful tone: “Above, clouds like dyed cotton wool hang low, so low I feel I can reach out and squeeze moisture from them. The new rains will come down soon” (Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus* 307). Kambili recognizes the possibility of renewal, the possibility that her newfound voice presents.

Kambili also focalizes the novel through Eugene. Through this focalization, the reader comes to understand Eugene’s strict ideological practices within the home that directly contradict his ideological opinions in regard to the Nigerian nation. Eugene is an abusive father, but he ironically becomes the voice for a voiceless Nigerian public.

Although Kambili is the narrator, “it is not only what Kambili says that matters, it is also about what she sees” (Udumukwu 193). Kambili recounts public executions, soldiers beating women in the streets, and university students rioting on campus. These images reveal the trauma that the Nigerian people face as a result of the political corruption in their society. Eugene is a writer for the *Standard*, “the only paper that dares to tell the truth these days” (Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus* 136). Eugene chooses to speak against the ills of Nigerian society, a feat that has major consequences. Thus, through the focalization of Eugene, it becomes clear that, while he is a patriarchal dictator within the home, he rebuts the practices of the oppressive military powers in an attempt to salvage the Nigerian nation. The government closes his factories and murders Ade Coker, the editor of the *Standard*. Yet, Eugene does not stop trying to expose the “Godless men ruling Nigeria” (Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus* 61). Adichie juxtaposes Eugene’s national voice with his constant suppression of his family’s voice. Although he becomes a dictator within his own home and contradicts his public persona, he nonetheless uses his national voice to speak against the horrors of Nigerian public life. This voice and additional national voices become necessary to initiate change and to expose the trauma that the Nigerian people have faced under oppressive military regimes and abuses of power that all originate from the practice of colonization. By publishing the truth about the national turmoil, Eugene allows for the possibility of healing to occur by demanding change and acknowledging fact versus fiction. Eugene’s attempt to publish the truth about current and past politics, economics, and culture becomes a mode of national healing.

The focalization of *Purple Hibiscus* through Kambili and Eugene creates polyvocality within the text. They both have completely different sets of ideologies, but

they each voice these ideologies through storytelling in order to initiate healing. Although it is easy to condemn Eugene, his use of voice to fight for democracy allows new perspective to the dimension of his character, and he contributes to a larger national story that incorporates the multiple voices of Nigerians. In addition, Kambili fights for personal liberation from Eugene, ultimately gaining agency through the discovery of her voice. By narrating the novel, Kambili's recovery from Eugene's abuse is clear because she is able to voice the trauma of her childhood. By recalling all of her traumatic experiences through the text within the novel, Kambili continues the healing process. Similarly, Eugene's employment of voice puts the nation's conditions into national and global conversation, the first step in correcting and healing from the trauma of Nigeria's past and the continuing trauma occurring during the present of the novel. Kambili and Eugene's use of voice represents the culturally specific need to tell one's story to heal from trauma and the implications storytelling has on one's ability to relate communally.

Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Purple Hibiscus* utilize focalization and polyvocality to stress the importance of voice communally and individually. The silencing of others becomes a main concern for Adichie. In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Olanna questions, "How much did one know of the true feelings of those who did not have a voice?" (313). This directly reflects the need for the traumatized to share their story with the community so that the "communal consciousness" can absorb the trauma and the individual can begin to heal from that trauma (Francis 27). The public will not know the feelings of an individual unless he or she speaks them into existence. Moreover, African society, history, and culture rely on orality for the transmission of culture and the creation of a larger national story. The Igbo characters must take part in this communal practice of

storytelling to heal as people and a nation. Similar sentiments are illustrated in *Purple Hibiscus* when Ade Coker states, “Imagine what the *Standard* would be if we were all quiet” (58). This statement reflects the need for voice to institute change and better one’s position within traumatic experiences. Voice becomes the vehicle for resistance.

This chapter has explored the importance of storytelling for both individual and national healing. Adichie’s use of multiple focalizers stresses the importance of multiple voices when telling a story, a story that must be told to initiate the healing process for African people after trauma. *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Purple Hibiscus* reveal individual instances of storytelling that contribute to personal therapy, but the novels also reflect a conglomeration of multiple voices to initiate a national voice and national healing after trauma. Storytelling becomes a primary method for relating to the community, defining personhood, and creating cultural history. This history incorporates all of the communal struggles and allows for a method of therapy for the storytellers.

Adichie continues this tradition of storytelling by writing novels that depict the struggles of her Igbo community. As a third generation Nigerian author, Adichie writes the past to share the trauma of her people and to continue the healing process of a nation still haunted by their past. *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Purple Hibiscus* are Adichie’s contribution to the historicization of Nigeria’s bloody history and her attempt to continue the healing process of her people through storytelling. Like the characters of her novels, Adichie participates in the culturally specific practice of storytelling in an attempt to create a new perspective of Nigeria’s past and to heal from the trauma experienced by the Nigerian people.

## CHAPTER V

### Conclusion

“The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.” – Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, “The Danger of a Single Story”

This thesis has argued against the single story of Africa, which has been historically perpetuated by colonizers and patriarchal powers, by interrogating the narratives in Adichie’s novels that create new perspectives of Nigerian history based on various characters and their experiences. These stories provide views of middleclass Igbo women’s experiences, both within the domestic sphere and within a larger national context, occurring during the years of the Biafran War and the 1990’s. The majority of Adichie’s audience includes Western readers, those whose perceptions of African life often include elements portrayed within the single story of Africa created by Western white men. This single story reduces Africa to “a place of beautiful landscapes, beautiful animals, and incomprehensible people, fighting senseless wars, dying of poverty and AIDS, unable to speak for themselves and waiting to be saved by a kind, white foreigner” (Adichie “The Danger of a Single Story”). However, Adichie’s novels combat the single story and give voice to middleclass Igbo women in order to elaborate on another aspect

of the Nigerian story—the story of middleclass Igbo women gaining agency amidst trauma and fighting for autonomy within the domestic sphere and national spheres.

The purpose of this thesis was to investigate the experiences of the middleclass Igbo women in Adichie’s novels in order to expose the links connecting the private with the public, the domestic with the national, and the multiple single stories with the larger national history. The first chapter of this thesis served as an introduction for the following chapters and outlined the arguments made throughout the thesis. The second chapter of this thesis analyzed Olanna and Kainene’s relationship with trauma and trauma’s impact on their gender performance in order to argue that there must be a gendered discourse when discussing the Biafran War because women adopt an active role within the home front and negotiate their performance to ensure survival. Chapter three continues an interrogation of trauma on middleclass Igbo women’s gender performance by analyzing Kambili’s discovery of subjectivity after escaping Eugene’s autocratic patriarchy and finding refuge in Ifeoma’s democratic home. This analysis of domestic sphere reflects the larger political situation in Nigeria, which includes an abuse of governmental power that strips the people of their voice. Therefore, chapter three illustrates the necessity of the adoption of cultural hybridity, as represented by the purple hibiscus, for the Nigerian public to improve their private and public situations. After discussing the multiple traumas and their relationships to gender performance in chapters two and three, chapter four argues that orality and storytelling become the primary mode for Nigerians to heal after trauma, both individually and nationally. These three chapters highlight the close relationship between the public and the private and the domestic and the national by exposing the importance of the individual within the community.

In order to accomplish this depiction of the relationship between individual and community, Adichie utilizes the settings of *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Purple Hibiscus* within the domestic sphere because “the invented homes in these narratives reflect private forms of public exclusions and oppressions” (Strehle 3). In other words, the private realm reflects larger injustices faced within Biafran and Nigerian society, and the home becomes a microcosm for the national. By situating her novels within the domestic sphere, Adichie portrays the daily life of Igbo men and women and creates a narrative that combats the single story through the depiction of daily Nigerian life within the larger national context. The public and private are constantly influencing each other throughout the novels. For example, the resistance of female characters against the initiators of their trauma reflects a rebellion against their current domestic situation and, ultimately, the national situation that manifests itself within patriarchy and government control through abuses of power. Adichie’s novels continually reflect the “individual’s relation to the collective” (Andrade 1).

Moreover, women’s domestic experiences during national traumas, such as their participation in the Biafran War and their existence within a patriarchal society, create a relationship between all middle class Igbo women. This is evident through the women’s alteration of gender performance after experiencing trauma from both war and domestic abuse. This illustrates that there is a gendered experience of war and a resistance against patriarchal control. Therefore, this becomes evidence that women are largely impacted by war and patriarchal society stifles their potential, no matter the geographic location.

The women in these novels speak their experiences into existence through storytelling. The middleclass Igbo women occupy just one positionality in their society;

their stories are just one part of a larger national story. Each female protagonist's stories of achievements, trauma, and love combine with other men, women, and children's stories to create an entire history of Nigeria. It is crucial that Nigerians utilize orality in order to heal after their traumatic past and in order to create a story comprised of a multiplicity of voices, rather than the voice of the white Westerner. People from various parts of Nigeria must tell their personal story in order to combat the single story that does not convey their experiences as men, women, and children of various classes and ethnicities. The stories of personal experience accumulate to create a national story, which ultimately occurs within the larger global sphere.

Adichie's novels reveal her desire to combat the single story of Nigeria's history while illustrating the strength of middleclass Igbo women to gain agency within both the domestic and the national communities. *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Purple Hibiscus* give voice to the historically voiceless and help Nigeria to heal from its past that includes colonialism, war, and governmental instability. As Adichie asserts in "The Danger of a Single Story," "Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity." For centuries, the single story of Africa created by colonial powers has permeated throughout the globe. Therefore, *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Purple Hibiscus* are Adichie's attempt to repossess Nigerian dignity and combat the single story that has misrepresented Africans for centuries.

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