



## **Acting out and Working Through in Chimimanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun***

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Half of a Yellow Sun*, written by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, is a novel filled with notions of tragedy, strife and survival. This novel recounts the experiences of characters who lived in a country torn apart by a civil war resulting from political upheaval. This study elucidates the trauma concepts of acting out and working through as done by the main characters of this novel. Furthermore, it ascertains why the characters are traumatised, the effects of the trauma and whether they recover from such trauma. There are quite a few concepts related to trauma theory, which is the literary theory used here as it best suits this research study. However, the main focus of this study is the concepts of acting out and working through from Dominick LaCapra. A close reading of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel in the light of trauma theory provides insight into how to understand the horrors of trauma. People are often ignorant of the horrors of trauma and how it can affect a person, unless they undergo trauma themselves. Furthermore, since trauma theory has been largely linked to the medical rather than the literary field, it is viewed as a contemporary theory, unlike post-colonialism or feminism. Therefore, this study will be beneficial to literary students and people who conduct research in the same field of study.

*Keywords:* Trauma theory, Nigerian-Biafran War, Dominick Lacapra, acting out, working through

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Civil war has plagued many countries of the African continent such as Burundi, Uganda and Nigeria, to name just three. Kitissou and Yoon stated that the slave trade and colonialism could have had a deep impact on the post-independence civil war in these countries (2014, pp.146-162). They added

that the slave trade was a lucrative means of economic gain, which precipitated a rush of Europeans to the African continent. Natural resources such as diamonds and gold led to a “scramble for Africa,” which saw European powers such as Britain, France and Germany colonising many parts of Africa (2014, pp.146-162).

Nigeria has gone through many adverse situations: it was colonised by the British and then enslaved by Europeans dating back to before the 1960s. Gaining independence did nothing much to benefit Nigerians, who upon liberation, were not able to manage their country and were soon thrust into another devastating event, the three-year civil war between Nigeria and Biafra. War involves carnage and destruction, and its aftermath represents the most devastating consequences that can befall a country and its people. It demands a heavy death toll, the disintegration of families and society and the emotional trauma of those who survive. Call and Cousens stated that “[w]hen peacebuilding fails, parties to conflict often unleash greater violence than in the prior war — grimly attested by the nearly two million dead after peace unravelled in Angola in 1991 and Rwanda in 1993-1994” (2008, pp.1-2).

Told in two parts, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, a novel by Chimimanda Ngozi Adichie, is set in the early and late 1960s. It revolves around the lives of characters from different backgrounds in a country before and during the civil war between the Hausa and Igbo ethnic tribes. This war between Nigerians and Biafrans was so devastating

and horrific that it left many people scarred and traumatised.

Trauma is a condition wherein a person relives the nightmare of a horrific or catastrophic event they experienced. Such events may have deep impact on a person who has endured much physical and mental abuse. This paper attempts to show how a person deals with such trauma through discussion of the lives of several characters who come together in this novel. The novel captures the lives of twin sisters, Olanna and Kainene, university lecturer, Odenigbo, British ex-patriot, Richard, and young villager, Ugwu, before, during and after the war. It unfolds the story of how the characters’ lives become intertwined, only to be torn apart by war, and how they come to terms with their new living conditions.

#### **AIM**

People tend to take life for granted and are often oblivious to any form of danger that might befall them, close friends and family. Be they natural or man-made, such events leave a mark on those who experience them. There are certain people who are trapped in the past and find it difficult to move on with their lives. They are unable to function normally because they are haunted by past events that remain fresh in their minds.

*Half of a Yellow Sun* illustrates the challenges people face as they fight for survival, from the onset of civil war until the war ends. The lives of the two characters chosen for this study are vividly described in the novel from the beginning, before war erupts up to the end of the political

turmoil. It details the challenges they face in order to survive. Their lives are changed so drastically that normalcy is a distant memory. They become witnesses to the atrocities of war. This paper explores how the characters' lives change because of the war and highlights the traumas they undergo. This paper also aims to determine whether they are able to make peace with the past and move on with their lives, or if they remain trapped in the grip of trauma.

## CONCEPTS

Any form of activity that can trigger nightmares or flashbacks with regards to a distressing past event that one has been struggling to forget can take a huge toll on the individual's mental and physical health. This explains the theory of trauma, which can be seen as the effects that are imprinted on a person's psyche after having undergone an intense emotional experience that manifests as recurring dreams or nightmares, and which makes it difficult for the individual to move on. Trauma is also described as an experience that a person undergoes that devastates them as a result of horrific events, such that they may have uninvited recurring images (Caruth, 1996). These recurring nightmares and hallucinations that disturb an individual from time to time are considered manifestations of trauma. Trauma prevents an individual from moving on in life; it disrupts all or any normalcy and causes much upheaval. Caruth acknowledged Sigmund Freud's definition of trauma as a wound that is inflicted upon the body, before further developing this definition to include

a violation of the mind, in which the wound cannot be seen in plain sight.

*[t]he breach in the mind's experience of time, self and the world is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that...is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor. (cited in Caruth, p.4)*

In order to enlighten the reader and make sense of the behaviour of the characters in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, two concepts in relation to trauma theory are applied. These two concepts, acting out and working through, are processes that are interconnected and necessary to overcome trauma. These two concepts, derived from the theory of trauma, are said to be responses made to overcome the trauma experienced by people (Schick, 2011). Dominick LaCapra is a trauma theorist who defined the concept of acting out as "the tendency to repeat something compulsively," whereby the person experiences repetitive memories of traumatic events, and the concept of working through is "a kind of countervailing force," such that the person makes an effort to break away from the problem at hand and is able to differentiate between the past and the present.

However, some people have been known to resist this form of therapy. They are only

able to undergo the process of acting out simply because they find it difficult to work through their trauma. There are situations when an individual is not prepared to face a life-shattering experience leading to anxiety and pain, or 'Angstbereitschaft', as Freud termed it (as cited in Verbestel, p.10). This can be explained as an overwhelming reaction to a horrific impact, the trauma resulting from which a person's brain is not prepared. This symptom can also be recognised as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and is seen as a way of acting out the traumatic experience. This situation of non-preparedness can result in a state of recurring trauma, which will affect an individual psychologically.

In order to overcome trauma, one needs to address the issues that prevent him or her from moving on with life, and this can only be done by going through the process of working through the painful experience. As Schick stated in her article, though the problems are worked through, they may recur. "Working through is itself a process that may never entirely transcend acting out... [it] is never achieved once and for all" (Schick, 2011).

It appears that one cannot discuss war literature without talking about violence, death and trauma. These events are interconnected and result in much pain and suffering. Furthermore, death is often the result of violence perpetrated by mankind and by known persons, as is the case in *Half of a Yellow Sun*.

## TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

The novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is written in two parts and illustrates the lives of the characters before and after civil war erupted between Nigeria and Biafra. The lives of the characters are intertwined, though the characters are from different backgrounds. It can be seen that the characters undergo drastic changes in their behaviour and personality after having experienced the horrors of civil war. The changes in their behaviour, personality and lifestyle can be attributed to the trauma that they experience. The lives of the two chosen characters from *Half of a Yellow Sun* are analysed in three time periods: pre-war, during the war and post-war to gauge the effects of trauma and determine whether they are able to move forward in their lives after the war.

Odenigbo and Olanna are the two selected characters who are referenced in an attempt to bring to life for the reader the horrors of the Nigeria-Biafra civil war that raged from 1967 to 1970. The novel also aims to show how war affects and traumatises people, irrespective of gender, age, race and social standards. Thus, the analysis of the two concepts of acting out and working through will be conducted based on the trauma experienced by these two main characters chosen from all the characters in the novel by Adichie.

## EXPLORING ODENIGBO'S TRAUMA

In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Odenigbo, in the first part of the novel set in the early 1960s, is depicted as a man of valour who believes

strongly in his ideologies; he is a man who is fearless in upholding his beliefs; one instance of this is when he says, “[Y]ou miserable ignoramus! You see a white person and he looks better than your own people? You must apologize to everybody in this queue! Right now!” (Adichie, 2007, p.29). It is clear from this excerpt that Odenigbo will not tolerate injustice, demonstrated here in the attitude of a ticket-seller in a university theatre who allowed a Western man to jump queue to the front of the queue. Odenigbo is disgusted with this obvious unrighteous favouritism and seeks to make the situation right, as he feels that all people should be treated equally, despite differences in their social status and, in this case, skin colour. As described in the excerpt above, Odenigbo is a man who oozes self-confidence, as evidenced when he sends Olanna to the airport and is walking away as “[h]e threw his legs out with an aggressive confidence: the gait of a person who would not ask for directions but remained sure that he would somehow get there” (Adichie, 2007, p.27).

Odenigbo's refined personality can be credited to his educational background. He is an academician who was educated at a good university. His routine includes friends who visit his home on a weekly basis to discuss education and recent affairs in Nigeria, which has moulded him into a knowledgeable and capable man, as described by Chimamanda:

*Nor did he entirely understand the conversations of Master and his*

*friends but listened anyway and heard that the world had to do more about the black people killed in Sharpeville, that the spy plane shot down in Russia served the Americans right, that De Gaulle was being clumsy in Algeria, that the United Nations would never get rid of Tshombe in Katanga.* (Adichie, 2007, p.17)

It is evident that Odenigbo and his circle of friends conduct intellectual discussions on Nigerian politics and foreign affairs. This keeps them updated on current affairs and, at the same time, instills a sense of solidarity among them. Odenigbo's status as a man, who is strong-willed, well versed and frank is challenged when he becomes involved in the civil war between the federal government and Biafra. Being patriotic, Odenigbo dedicates every part of his being to seeking justice for Biafra as a free nation.

Despite the horrors and mayhem of civil war, Odenigbo remains positive and is an important figure in his small community at the university. This can be seen clearly from the excerpt below:

*Odenigbo climbed up to the podium waving his Biafran flag: swaths of red, black, and green and, at the centre, a luminous half of a yellow sun. 'Biafra is born! We will lead Black Africa! We will live in security! Nobody will ever again attack us! Never again!'* (Adichie, 2007, p.163)

With life getting harder by the day, any sliver of hope is vital as a means to survive. Odenigbo, being the head of his family, renews his family's faith and hope in the birth of a new beginning:

*'This is our beginning,' Odenigbo said. That false softness had left his voice and he sounded normal again, bracing and sonorous. He took his glasses off and grabbed Baby's little hands and began to dance around in circles with her. (Adichie, 2007, p.162)*

The excerpt above signifies the replenishment of strength and hope in Odenigbo's household. Although he is deemed a person who will not easily break due to circumstances, there is one particular event that manages to penetrate his psyche. This is when his close friends fall victim to war and he has to evacuate his home. The event that has the most impact and which traumatises Odenigbo is the reception of the news of his mother's murder. Consider the excerpt below:

*Your master's mother is dead...His cousin sent a message...They shot her in Abba. (Adichie, 2007, p.299)*

Odenigbo's mother had been his pillar of strength, despite the fact that she had not treated his partner Olanna well. He is so deeply devastated by the news of his mother's passing that, thereafter, he is a completely changed person. The excerpt

below describes Odenigbo's changed personality as he begins not to take work seriously and spends more time in bars, rather than at home with his family. The man of valour has clearly gone:

*But she had not seen that smile since his mother died, since he tried to go to Abba and came back clutching a shadow, since he began to leave for work too early and to stop at Tanzania Bar on his way home. (Adichie, 2007, p.321)*

Losing the pillar in his life, his mother, losing his friends and having his world turned upside down leaves him inconsolable and traumatised. His mother refused to follow him to a safer place, and as a result, she was shot dead, at home, by a soldier. He feels guilty over his mother's death because he had been unable to convince her to leave her home, and also because he had listened to Olanna who had told him to leave his mother behind because she believed that she would not come to any harm. This, however, is proven to be tragically wrong when his mother is killed.

The trauma he endures as a result of these life-changing events causes a drastic change in his personality. Odenigbo changes into a different person; he becomes withdrawn, a recluse. He stops going to social events, mainly because of the war, but more so because of the fact that he has lost all interest in life:

*When he came back, long after midnight, with his shoes covered in*

*mud, she knew he would not be the same again.* (Adichie, 2007, p.322)

The excerpt above expresses Olanna's realisation that Odenigbo is no longer the man she fell in love with, the man who swept her off her feet with his strong demeanour and conviction in just causes. An example can be seen from the time Odenigbo fought for liberation, for the Republic of Biafra. It is as if the passion that once raged within him died the moment he lost his mother. These complete changes in Odenigbo's character can be identified as acting out, a process that a person goes through after experiencing trauma. The following excerpt illustrates the change in Odenigbo:

*But he no longer went into the interior with the Agitator Corps, no longer returned with lit-up eyes.* (Adichie, 2007, p.322)

It is evident that Odenigbo has lost the will to live and to love. He has become a broken man who keeps to himself and avoids talking to the people around him. In the early 1960s he was a man who was passionate towards his partner; however, after experiencing these traumatic events, he becomes withdrawn and avoids being intimate with Olanna, especially during the first days after his mother's passing. According to LaCapra, "one may never entirely transcend an attachment to a lost other, or even some kind of identification with a lost other" (LaCapra, 1998, p.6). Odenigbo's behavior can be seen as a sign of

acting out, withdrawing from people in his need to withdraw and face his grief alone:

*Master came home from work earlier than usual and did not go to Tanzania Bar; Ugwu hoped that their absence had pulled him out of the ditch he sunk into when his mother died.* (Adichie, 2007, p.353)

Odenigbo's loyal servant, Ugwu, is also affected by the changes in his master as he feels that Odenigbo is no more the person he once looked up to. Indeed, Odenigbo, driven by grief and guilt, buries himself in work, almost as if he is imposing some form of punishment upon himself:

*When the other men cracked jokes and laughed, he did not. He spoke only about the work.* (Adichie, 2007, p.332)

Odenigbo feels lost without his mother, which LaCapra defined thus:

*When loss is converted into (or encrypted in an indiscriminately generalized rhetoric of) absence, one faces the impasse of endless melancholy, impossible mourning, and interminable aporia in which any process of working through the past and its historical losses is foreclosed or prematurely aborted.* (LaCapra, 1999, p.698)

Odenigbo tries hard to forget his painful past and works through his pain by busying

himself in his work. When a person makes an effort to distance themselves from their past and come to terms with their pain in order to move on, it can be regarded as a state of working-through trauma. This process of working through is necessary in order to break free from the clasp of trauma that haunts a person's life. In the novel, Odenigbo's behaviour demonstrates his struggle to deal with his past, from which he makes some positive recovery. LaCapra surmised that:

*In the working through, the person tries to gain critical distance on a problem, to be able to distinguish between past, present and future. For the victim, this means his ability to say to himself, "Yes, that happened to me back then. It was distressing, overwhelming, perhaps I can't entirely disengage myself from it, but I'm existing here and now, and this is different from back then." There may be other possibilities, but it's via the working-through that one acquires the possibility of being an ethical agent. (LaCapra, 1998, pp.2-3)*

Odenigbo rejoins society and, once more, assumes responsibility as head of his household. By this time, the war is almost at its end and he is able to visit his deceased mother's home and grave as "his cousin had buried her; near the guava tree...Odenigbo knelt down there and pulled out a tuft of grass and held it in his hand" (Adichie, 2007,

p.415). It can be seen from this excerpt that Odenigbo finally feels a sense of release and calm when he was able to go back to his deceased mother's home.

As discussed earlier, Odenigbo's sense of guilt over his mother's brutal murder by the federal soldier has weighed heavily on him, thus affecting his life and relationship with his family. Therefore, when he is able to set foot in his mother's home and visit her grave, he manages to exorcise his demons and absolve himself of guilt. He has finally come to terms with his loss and can make peace with himself. LaCapra explained his definition of working-through as "the person tries to gain critical distance on a problem, to be able to distinguish between past, present and future" (LaCapra, 1998). This is evident during the post-war period when, in coming to terms with his past, Odenigbo heals himself of the trauma that has so haunted him.

## **EXPLORATION OF OLANNA'S TRAUMA**

The second character chosen for analysis in this paper is a woman called Olanna, who is the life partner of the character Odenigbo, discussed above. Olanna is described in the novel, during the early 1960s, as an intelligent woman who hails from a distinguished and well-off family. She was educated in England and works as a lecturer at a university, like her partner, Odenigbo. Olanna is portrayed as a beautiful modern woman with a mind of her own. This can be seen in the excerpt that reveals Ugwu's first impression of his master's partner:



*It was this woman's fault, this woman that Master considered too special even for him to cook for. Just come back from London, indeed.* (Adichie, 2007, p. 22)

It is evident that Ugwu is informed by Odenigbo of Olanna's status and that Odenigbo's affections for her are strong. Consider the excerpt below regarding the moment Ugwu meets Olanna in person:

*Her Igbo words were softer than her English, and he was disappointed at how easily they came out. He wished she would stumble her Igbo; he had not expected English that perfect to sit beside equally perfect Igbo.* (Adichie, 2007, p.23)

It can be seen from this excerpt that Ugwu thinks little of Olanna and begrudges her hold over his master. However, one cannot help but notice his sense of awe upon hearing her spoken English, which seems better than his master's. In the early 1960s, she was easily befriended by Odenigbo's friends and loved by Ugwu. She is also a woman full of life, with a vibrant personality that easily attracts people. However, everything changes when civil war breaks out. During the late sixties, at the height of the war, she witnesses atrocities and carnage: the mutilated bodies of her relatives, as can be seen in the following excerpt:

*Then she noticed Auntie Ifeka's kiosk, or what remained of it...She*

*stopped when she saw the bodies. Uncle Mbaezi lay facedown in an ungainly twist, legs splayed. Something creamy white oozed through the large gash on the back of his head. Auntie Ifeka lay on the veranda. The cuts on her naked body were smaller, dotting her arms and legs like slightly parted red lips.* (Adichie, 2007, p.147)

Olanna was close to the relatives brutally murdered, and this event leaves her deeply traumatised. The brutal massacre was done by a family friend in the name of religion and was "rationalized within the context of 'war'" (Ojinmah, 2012, p.5). After witnessing this grisly scene, she narrowly escapes a dangerous situation herself. As she is fleeing to safety, Olanna witnesses a woman carrying the head of her child in a calabash. It is an image that will further haunt and traumatise her, haunt her into trauma:

*She saw the little girl's head with the ashen-grey skin and the plaited hair and rolled-back eyes and open mouth.* (Adichie, 2007, p.149)

The trauma that she experiences is so profound that it affects her physically and psychologically. These experiences and images so traumatise her that they lead to deterioration of her health. Caruth stated that modern neurobiologists indicate that "repetition of the traumatic experience in the flashback can itself be retraumatizing; if

not life-threatening, it is at least threatening to the chemical structure of the brain and can ultimately lead to deterioration” (p.63). Olanna’s health deteriorates to such an extent that she loses her voice and is unable to walk. The following excerpt explains her situation:

*She wanted him to stop being ridiculous, but her lips were heavy. Speaking was a labour. When her parents and Kainene visited, she did not say much; it was Odenigbo who told them what she had seen.* (Adichie, 2007, p.157)

The moment that Olanna loses her ability to walk, as seen in the excerpt, “Olanna’s Dark Swoops began the day she came back from Kano, the day her legs failed” (Adichie, 2007, p.156), she began the process of acting out, which is the first concept in the theory of trauma. As described by Caruth, acting out is a repetitive account of traumatic experiences. Olanna is seen to have recurring nightmares about her painful past events, as described above. The dark depths that she plumbs can be described as symptoms and evidence of acting out, an obvious side-effect of deep trauma. This is parallel to LaCapra’s theory that a traumatic event is repressed before it revisits a person in compulsive repetition (LaCapra, 1994).

Another important event that contributes to Olanna’s trauma is when her twin sister Kainene does not return from her quest to find food for her family. Kainene’s British

partner, Richard, confirms her absence, acknowledging that “she was not back when he returned from Ahiara in the evening” (Adichie, 2007, p.405). The pain that Olanna feels at losing her twin sister is devastating and only serves to intensify her trauma. Consider the excerpt below:

*Olanna’s moments of solid hope, when she was certain that Kainene would come back, were followed by stretches of raw pain, and then a surge of faith would make her hum under her breath, until the downward slide came and she would be crumpled on the floor, weeping and weeping.* (Adichie, 2007, p.431)

Undoubtedly, Olanna is going through the process of acting out, for she is unable to process the news of her sister’s disappearance and possible death. As Caruth mentioned in her book regarding Freud’s early work on trauma, “the confrontation with death takes place too soon, too suddenly, too unexpectedly, to be fully grasped by consciousness” (Caruth, 1996, p.101). Therefore, Olanna is going through a phase in which her consciousness is neither able to accept the news of Kainene’s disappearance nor bear the extra pain that she has been suffering from her accumulated traumas.

After several failed attempts to locate Kainene, Olanna remarks, “Our people say that we all reincarnate, don’t they? ...When I come back in my next life, Kainene will

be my sister. She had started to cry softly” (Adichie, 2007, p.433). It can be seen from the excerpt that Olanna eventually comes to terms with her loss and is willing to work through her fears, pain and suffering and move on from her traumatic past. Olanna's willingness to overcome her pain and let go of her past is considered an act of working through her trauma. As LaCapra, in his book *Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma*, mentioned, “trauma and an insistence that there is no alternative to symptomatic acting-out and the repetition compulsion other than imaginary...hope for totalization, full closure, and redemptive meaning” (LaCapra, 1994). The war has brought upon them untold grief, stripped them of their comfort and security, changed them and left them scarred for life. There are those who may not be able to work through their trauma and will forever be haunted by their past. It is a very difficult and painful task to undertake and not everyone is likely to deal with their trauma, thus failing to achieve working through (Schick, 2011).

When one studies works of war literature, one cannot ignore the mournful force that these types of works impart. One will undoubtedly feel the chill and intense horror of the violence and gruesome deaths so vividly described by the authors. The recurring themes that can be found in these types of novels are violence, pain, trauma and death. Violence and trauma are the main themes highlighted in this novel by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and she depicts events almost as if she has experienced the horrors of civil war first-

hand. For Ojinmah, “*Half of a Yellow Sun*, is not just a story of the horrors of Nigeria's civil war; Adicie refreshingly explores some thematic concerns through which the harrowing experiences of the war are highlighted” (2012, p.4).

## CONCLUSION

The novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* centres on the war-torn country of Nigeria and the ensuing trauma that affects its main characters in its aftermath. Trauma in a person can be triggered by any given number of events, and its severity depends on the catastrophe that has befallen them. A traumatised person is unable to get past the painful memories of the tragedy that has befallen him or her, and this shatters the individual's sense of security and peace.

From the novel *Half of a Yellow Sun*, the two main characters chosen for analysis in this paper are forced to vacate their homes and move to an unfamiliar place of meagre means where food is scarce and life difficult. The daily struggle for survival amid death and destruction takes an indelible psychological and physical toll on them. Under these circumstances, their lives are changed forever. It is apparent that the characters discussed here experience horrors of war that change their lives. They go through the process of acting out and eventually work through their trauma to move on from their troubled past. Although they manage to move on in their lives, they are unable to forget the past. Trauma is a malaise that is difficult to overcome without

the process of working through, and this requires great effort and willpower to do.

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