The Intersection of History, Literature and Trauma in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun*

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Author

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is an author who is mainly concerned with the ongoing effects of colonization in Africa, and more importantly Nigeria. Adichie was born in 1977 in Enugu, Nigeria. She grew up in the university town Nsukka, where both of her parents worked at the university. She started the study of medicine but dropped out after a year and a half to pursue her writing career. Adichie’s first novel *Purple Hibiscus* was published in 2003; the book has received wide critical acclaim. Her second novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* was released in 2006, and is set before and during the Nigeria-Biafra War. In 2009 Adichie published a volume of short stories named *The Thing around Your Neck*. Now Adichie divides her time between Nigeria, where she teaches, and the United States.

1.2 Historical Situation

*Half of a Yellow Sun*, Adichie’s second novel, was published in 2006. It is set in Nigeria, and deals with two periods, the early 60s and the late 60s, which are of pivotal importance in the postcolonial history of Nigeria. In the late 60s, the country was involved in a bloody and violent conflict, the Nigeria-Biafra War, which lasted from 1967 to 1970. Adichie shifts between these two time periods in the novel. In the parts on the early 60s, the events leading up to the violent conflict are sketched, and the main characters are introduced. Since the novel deals with real historic events, it is useful to investigate the way in which the author chooses to portray them. There are many different ways in which historical events can be approached, and depending on where the emphasis is put, a very different picture may be the outcome.

To be able to fully understand the historical context of the events described in the novel and referred to in this dissertation, it is crucial to touch on the origins of the conflict and explain how the tensions escalated into a full-fledged war. To this end, I have drawn on two works: Falola Toyin’s *Colonialism and Violence in Nigeria* (2009) and Aleksandar Pavović’s *Creating New States, Theory and Practice of Secession* (2007). Toyin is a Nigerian scholar who focuses on African history; Pavović’s work sheds light on the mechanisms of secession, and on the violence they often entail. The territory of Nigeria came under the colonial influence of Britain in the late 19th century and became a British colony in 1914. However, within the territory of what the British called ‘a country’, they united three entirely different
ethnic groups. The three predominant ethnic groups in Nigeria are the Igbo in the southeast, the Hausa-Fulani in the north and the Yoruba in the southwest.

Nigeria attained its independence from the United Kingdom in 1960. Its three ethnic groups formed three major internal units, and each had very different cultural customs and political structures. Due to reasons as less fertile soil, the overpopulated eastern coast, and the search for work, the Igbo and other Easterners migrated to the northern parts of Nigeria. In January 1966 a group of Igbo majors attempted a coup, and Yoruba and Hausa political leaders were killed. The Igbo General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi became President. This coup was perceived as an Igbo conspiracy. It led to riots and a first wave of massacres in which hundreds of Igbos were killed. In July 1966, there occurred a counter-coup by the North, and Ironsi was killed. Lieutenant Colonel Yakubu Gowon came to power with the support of the United Kingdom and the United States. However, the military governor of the Eastern Region, Lieutenant Colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu, refused to recognize Gowon as anything else than a temporary head of state.

Further ethnic tensions led to more massacres by Northern soldiers of Christian Igbos in the North which brought about a large scale exodus of the Igbo and other Easterners out of the northern part of Nigeria. Peace accords, like the one at Aburi in Ghana failed, and on 30 May 1967 Ojukwu proclaimed the secession of the southeast of Nigeria as the republic of Biafra. Its flag shows half of a rising sun and was the inspiration for the title of Adichie’s novel. The Nigerian government did not recognize this new republic, however, and the Nigeria-Biafra War began in July. Even though the Biafran troops were outnumbered, and had a shortage of weapons, they managed to achieve some wins in the beginning of the war. However, with the support of the United Kingdom and the USSR, the federal troops encircled the area, and blocked all of Biafra’s links to the outside world. This led to a great shortage of means and food; it is estimated that up to three million people died in Biafra, mostly from starvation. Ojukwu fled, and Biafra surrendered to the federal troops on January 13 1970. The violence between the different ethnic groups, however, continued after this. Even though the ethnic tensions are still a part of the Nigerian reality today, their intensity has lessened somewhat over the last decades.
1.3 Literary Context: Adichie as an African Author

During her childhood in Nigeria Adichie read a lot of British novels; she mentions the writer Enid Blyton, a British children’s writer, frequently in interviews. When Adichie started to write her own stories, these all revolved around white middle-class characters. It was only when she started to read novels by African writers, such as Chinua Achebe’s novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958), around the age of eight that she realized that black Africans and the history of her own country was a possible topic of novels. She herself says: ‘I like to think of Achebe as the writer whose work gave me permission to write my own stories.’ (Adichie, ‘African “Authenticity” and the Biafran Experience’, p.42) Achebe is seen as the father of African literature, and as someone who paved the way for many writers who came after him. Achebe links Adichie to the African literary tradition.

Heather Hewett discusses Nigerian writing in her essay ‘Coming of Age: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and the Voice of the Third Generation’. In this essay she mentions how Ngugi wa Thiong’o has defined three “stages” of African literature: ‘the age of anti-colonial struggle, the age of independence, and the age of neo-colonialism’. (Hewett) In the same way, critics have divided the literary tradition of Nigeria into three generations. Writers who have published work before and directly after independence (1960), such as Chinua Achebe, are included in the first generation. Those writers whose work was published after the Nigerian Civil War (1966-1967), as for example Niyi Osundare, are called the second generation. The third generation includes the writers who published their first work in the middle of the 1980s. Seeing as Adichie published her first novel *Purple Hibiscus* in 2003 she, strictly speaking, should not be included in this generation. However, other factors do make a strong case for her inclusion.

Adichie is one of the youngest members of the third generation. Pius Adesanmi and Chris Dunton discuss the third generation in their essay ‘Nigeria’s Third Generation Writing: Historiography and Preliminary Theoretical Considerations’. Some of the important differences between the first and second generation are, firstly, the shift from poetry to the novel and, secondly, the recognition its output received from the international community. (Adesanmi and Dunton, p.8) Some of the important thematic features of the third generation’s fiction include an urban setting, and an emphasis on ‘deprivation, the denial of individual human rights and aspirations, the degradation of social relations under a series of increasingly despotic and corrupt regimes’. (p.11) These features are present in Adichie’s novel: the novel starts off in the university town Nsukku, and the characters’ travels lead them from one town
to another. The living conditions however, deteriorate heavily as their journey goes on, and as the war continues and the government cuts Biafra off from the outside world, food becomes scarce and people starve to death. The main characters struggle to stay alive, and the interpersonal relationships also suffer under the constant stress and danger of the war.

Furthermore, a focus on ‘the activities of reading and writing’ and ‘the perils of journalism’ is also a common characteristic of the writing of the third generation. (Adesanmi and Dunton, p.11) Reading and writing are central themes of *Half of a Yellow Sun*; the university context of the story is an apparent manifestation of this theme, as universities are seen as places of learning, reading and writing. Also, the characters Richard and Ugwu both attempt to write about history. Richard is fascinated by the Igbo-Ukwu art, and wants to write a novel about it. Ugwu writes a book about the origins of the Nigeria-Biafra War. Adichie also shows the shortcomings of Western journalism, as it fails to see Nigeria as anything else than a violent, primal country.

Lastly, Adesanmi and Dunton mention the generation’s use of ‘the trope of incarceration and the aesthetics of trauma’. (p.17) The fear of incarceration is present in Olanna’s fear for Ugwu being drafted into the army, which seems like a prison. The novel as a whole represents Adichie’s trauma of the war of Biafra; a trauma which she inherited from her family: ‘I was aware of how this war haunted my family.’ (‘African “Authenticity” and the Biafran Experience’, p.50) The novel also shows how the different characters deal with the traumas that are the result of terrible experiences or horrors inflicted upon them during the course of the war. Also, the practise of writing and narrating is very significant to all of them as they attempt to work through their trauma. Some characters are significantly changed by their traumas. Ugwu is one of them, the trauma of fighting in the war leads to him raping an innocent girl, which shocks the reader. Another example of this dramatic change is Olanna, who cannot walk for a period of time after she finds the mutilated bodies of her family members. These traumas will be discussed in more detail in chapter four.

The new direction the writers of the third generation have taken with their fiction is discussed by Jane Bryce, with a focus on female writers in her essay “Half and Half Children”: Third-Generation Women Writers and the New Nigerian Novel’. This includes a shift from a central masculinity to an identity which is varied and multidimensional. (Bryce, p.50) The characters in the novel are all of different backgrounds, and there is no special emphasis on the male characters. The identity that Adichie puts forward in her novel is an African one; the female and male characters are both well-rounded and full. Adichie shows
the events through the eyes of three different characters; the result of these different voices is a reality which is also multidimensional.

Bryce points out that the majority of the latest novels written by Nigerian female writers have been realist. Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun* is a realist novel as well. She says: ‘This is perhaps the most puzzling thing about them [recent novels by Nigerian women] – their happy acceptance of the realist imperative to tell a coherent story from a more-or-less unified perspective, in well constructed English sentences’. (p.53) Bryce finds this surprising, as these writers have entire alternative signifying systems available to them, which they make (almost) no use of. Adichie uses realism as ‘“control” in metafictional texts, the norm or the background against which the experimental strategies can foreground themselves’. (Waugh, p.18) The question may be raised whether or not the realist mode is an adequate way to describe the trauma of the Nigeria-Biafra War. Adichie makes use of the English language to write her novel, but also frequently inserts Igbo sentences and words. This makes the reader aware that these characters would be speaking in Igbo to one another, and that the story is mediated. These issues will be discussed further in chapters three and four.

Bryce also comments on the question of parentage of these female writers of the third generation and, she concludes that *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe constitutes the ‘ground on which later writers endlessly signify’. (p.55) With this novel Achebe operates within the same context as Adichie; they both write about a past that they themselves did not experience. However, their reasons for writing differ. Achebe meant to show that the African continent had a rich cultural tradition, that it had a past, that it was not as dark a place as how the colonizers would portray it. They also have in common that in no way they claim or intend to write history, and portray an entirely historically correct story. Nevertheless, the historical details are also part of the core of the message their novels try to send.

A classification in different categories like the one mentioned above can be criticized as limiting, creating unity where in reality there is none, and giving an illusionary image of the real scope of the Nigerian literary production. But it is also a helpful tool to chart the changes the literature of a nation goes through. Each generation publishes within a certain time-frame, and seems to be characterized by an important event in history, so it would be evident to assume that each generation’s writing is inherently influenced and determined by that event. Adichie actively positions herself in the Nigerian literary tradition, and makes frequent references to one writer in particular, Chinua Achebe. Achebe is a Nigerian novelist, poet, essayist and critic; his first and best known novel is called *Things Fall Apart* (1958). Adichie refers to him by opening her first novel *Purple Hibiscus* with the words: ‘Things
started to fall apart at home when my brother, Jaja, did not go to communion.’ (Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus*, p.3) Thus she directly references Achebe’s novel. She describes Achebe as follows: ‘Achebe is the most important writer for me, and so every opportunity I have to pay tribute to him I’ll take it.’ (Adichie, ‘Fortunes of War and Peace’) In her second novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, she cites one of Achebe’s poems in the epigraph. She takes a few lines from *Mango Seedling*, a poem which Achebe dedicated to the poet Okigbo: ‘Today I see it still – Dry, wire-thin in sun and dust of the dry months – Headstone on tiny debris of passionate courage’ It is believed that the character of Okeoma in Adichie’s novel is meant as a homage to Okigbo. In citing Achebe’s poem and creating the character of Okeoma, Adichie makes a double attempt to link her project with that of Achebe.

### 1.4 The Act of Narrating: Literature, History and Trauma

*Half of a Yellow Sun* deals with the mixture of a lot of different stories, and a lot of different narrators. The aspect of telling or narrating is central to the novel. Adichie has different narrative strategies intersect in her novel: Ugwu writes the story of the Nigeria-Biafra War, Richard is a novelist, and for Olanna, Richard and Ugwu the articulation or narration of their traumas is central to working through it. Adichie combines these to question the boundaries between the literary, the historical and the psychological. An analysis of these different narrative strategies will shed light on the intersections between the three, how the borders between them are blurred, and what this blurring can accomplish.

The second chapter deals with the intersection of history and literature, and how Adichie engages with this in her novel. This chapter examines the nature of the historical novel. Hayden White is a central figure in this discussion, seeing as he introduced the narrative turn in historical debate. The third chapter, then, applies the theory of the second chapter in more detail to the novel, with a focus on the representation of the literary role of Richard and Ugwu. Great attention is paid to Ugwu’s authorship of *The Book*, and the way in which Adichie uses Ugwu to put forward several insights about the ownership of narratives and history. Adichie also initiates a discussion about how reality is represented in writing.

The third chapter connects the theoretical debate on history with the debate on trauma theory, and this in relation with the postcolonial context. In both debates the concepts of language, representation and narration figure prominently. The focus is on the representation of Adichie’s own trauma which she inherited from her parents, the traumatic after-effects of the period of colonization that are affecting Nigerian society today, and the characters’
individual traumatic experiences of the war. Narration and testimony are central to overcoming the stifling effect of trauma. The problems with the application of trauma theory, a Western concept, on the postcolonial African context will also be touched upon.
2. LITERATURE AND HISTORY: INTERLINKED DISCOURSES

The historical facts of the Biafran conflict form the basis of the story Adichie tells in her novel. But how does Adichie, as a fiction writer, approach these facts and how does she incorporate them into her novel? To be able to shed light on this, questions about the representation of history, the relationship between history and fiction and goals of writing about history must be answered. Towards the end of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, the conception of history and history writing changed drastically. This inevitably also had consequences for the branch of literature which is occupied with history, seeing as the historical novel and historiography are two intimately linked domains. The nature of history has been discussed extensively but the relation between historical events and contemporary literature needs to be analyzed further. Scholars such as White, Frank Ankersmit and Hans Kellner have revolutionized the way in which the relation between history and literature is viewed, and have introduced the narrative turn in historical debate. It is crucial to determine the ways in which authors today deal with history, because with this knowledge it may become clear how this generation of authors deals with their past, how they adapt their literary formats to it, and which sources they draw on. Each author will do this in his or her own personal way, and Adichie’s use of ‘telling’ in the novel relates back to her own views on the use and goals of literature.

In order to come to an understanding of the relation between history and historical fiction, these two terms have to be clarified. The question: ‘What is history?’ takes this argument into the field of philosophy of history. The Standford Encyclopedia of Philosophy views ‘history’ in the following way: ‘history is a temporally ordered sequence of events and processes involving human doings, within which there are interconnections of causality, structure, and action, within which there is the play of accident, contingency, and outside forces.’ (Little, ‘Philosophy of History’) The key concepts that are important in this definition are chronology, the human element and interaction. The philosophy of history centres on issues like the possibility of objectivity, the ways in which history is recovered, on what scale history should be studied, and whether or not a pattern can be discerned in history. The claim of objectivity is of particular interest in this context, because it seems to be the decisive factor that separates history from historical fiction. However, this will be further nuanced by Ankersmit’s insights on the historical novel.

At first sight, one may see a contradiction in the term ‘historical novel’. Historical writing has traditionally been seen as producing a factual account, while the subject of a novel
is considered fictional. I would like to attempt to form a tentative definition of the historical novel: when viewed in a broad sense, the historical novel revolves around the attempt to capture a specific moment or period of the past, make sense of it, and find its meaning or cause. The Encyclopaedia Britannica, which is a general encyclopaedia, contains the following definition: ‘a novel that has as its setting a period of history and that attempts to convey the spirit, manners, and social conditions of a past age with realistic detail and fidelity (which is in some cases only apparent fidelity) to historical fact.’ This definition centres on the attempt at representation, and does not mention any concern for sense-making.

In his work on the historical novel, Jerome de Groot captures some of the main characteristics of this specific type of novel. First of all, he comments on how historical writing can take place within a lot of different genres; it can take the form of a romance, fantasy, gothic, and many others. Its ‘intergeneric hybridity’ is one of its most characteristic features. (de Groot, p.2) He adds that one of the most common criticisms on historical fiction is its ability to change facts, and how its readers let themselves be knowingly mislead by this. This innate strangeness of the genre is also touched on by the authors of historical fiction, as they often write an explanatory note about how they relate to the subject matter and where they underline that the content they have produced is indeed fictional. As de Groot points out: ‘The form is obsessed with pointing out its own partiality, with introducing other voices and undermining its authority.’ (p.8) Adichie also introduces such an explanation in the ‘Author’s note’ at the end of the novel: ‘This book is based on the Nigeria-Biafra War of 1967-70. While some of the characters are based on actual persons, their portrayals are fictitious as are the events surrounding them.’ The authors of historical fiction show that they are aware of the strangeness of the act they perform, and of how their fictional project intersects with reality and history. Such an explanation introduces a metafictional element into the form; it comments directly on the artificial nature of the novel.

Historiography is an entirely different way of writing and thinking about history compared to the historical novel. Kellner, who is part of the narrative school, draws on Huizinga when he contemplates the function of historiography and the historical novel: ‘[i]f history is the way in which a culture deals with its own past, then historical understanding is a vital cultural enterprise’. (Kellner, p.xi) He adds that the historical imagination is an important part of how we manage our past. Again, the emphasis is on the human intervention in the making of these stories. History is written based on sources, and narrative is used in this process of sense-making. As Kellner points out: ‘Narrative exists to make continuous what is discontinuous; it covers the gaps in time, in action, in documentation.’ (p.55) This links up
with the ideas introduced by White and Ankersmit on how ‘the historian performs an essentially poetic act’. (*Metahistory*, p.x) These insights point out the similarities between historiography and the historical novel, rather than emphasizing their differences.

Patrick Brady comments on the historical novel in his book *Memory and History as Fiction*. He addresses the relationship between historiography and the historical novel by first pointing out the differences between them:

History … refers to a “real” past, a belief or set of beliefs about that past, and purports to report the “truth” about that “real” past. The historical novel, on the other hand, like the autobiographical novel, refers to a “real” past but neither aims nor claims to reproduce it with scrupulous accuracy. (p.17-18)

However, he goes on to emphasize that these two discourses are more alike than they differ from each other. Historiography largely draws upon memory, and these are not stable entities. Memory has a reconstructive character, and is a fictional construct. Seeing as memory is central to history, history writing is also fictional. Brady points out that ‘the historical novel is distinguished not by its being fiction but by the greater degree of fictionalization involved and by the consciousness or explicitness of this fictional status’. (Brady, p.18) It is evident that these two discourse differ in some ways, but also that they intersect in numerous ways.

### 2.1 Twentieth-century Debate on History

To be able to grasp the current ongoing debate on history, it is important to outline the evolution leading up to the twentieth century. Definitions about historical writing go back to the first century BC. According to Cicero, a historian has to adhere to three principles: he must speak the truth, cannot omit any information and must be objective. (Gossman, p.3) Cicero formulated important ideas on history, historians, and the general past. Lionel Gossman points out that at a time when history was considered a part of literature, Cicero distinguished between the mere registering of facts on the one hand and literary writings on history on the other. (p.3) Aristotle distinguished between the poet and the historian. He claimed the true difference between the two resided in the fact that the one related what may have happened and the other what had happened. (Ankersmit, ‘Truth in History and Literature’, p.43)

The view on historiography has changed repeatedly over the course of time. At the end of the eighteenth century it came to be seen as a discourse entirely different from literature, this was because the definition of literature began to change. It was at the end of the
eighteenth century that the factual nature of historic writing began to be put into question. Writing is essentially creating a narrative, and, as Gossman points out through a quote by Chladenius, a German theologian from the eighteenth century, ‘a narration wholly abstracted from its own point of view is impossible’. (p.6) It is no coincidence that this idea originated in the eighteenth century, as this was the time of the Romantic Era. Its emphasis on originality and individual expression formed a fertile basis for these ideas to grow.

In the twentieth century, the debate on the nature of history focuses on issues such as truth claims, subjectivity, and narrative character. This debate is led by those involved in the narrative school, this includes literary critics such as White, Ankersmit and Kellner. The objective historian who is absent from the account he writes is a concept which was rejected by this movement, seeing as they view the historian as actively involved in the process of history-making. This can be seen to refute Cicero’s first principle: a historian must be objective. The emphasis was put firmly on subjectivity, as it is pointed out in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: ‘There is no such thing as “perspective-free history.”’ (Little, part1)

The issue of the narrative character of the historical text revolves around the practise of organization of past events and then bringing them together in one unified narrative. This organization entail the arrangement of events, decisions about the inclusion or exclusion of events, and stressing or subordinating events. History moved away from an ‘even and objective time-flow’ and began to put the concept of discontinuity in its centre. (Gossman, p.25) These claims also had an impact on how the results of historical study were viewed, the possibility of achieving total and unified knowledge about the past was being questioned. Gossman refers to Besançon who insisted on how ‘in the end, historical study produces ... a book, a text’. (p.29) The most memorable and radical claim the modern debate on historiography produced must be the emphasis on the linguistic existence of historical narratives. As Gossman points out: ‘History constructs its objects, and ... its objects are objects of language, rather that entities of which words are in some way copies.’ (p.29)

2.2 History as Narrative

One of the key figures in the field of literary criticism and history is Hayden White; he is one of the founders of the narrative turn in historical debate. He came to prominence in the second half of the twentieth century with his (post) structuralist focus on language; his most well-known work is *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*
In this work White attempts to trace the history of historical consciousness in Europe in the nineteenth-century, and tries to contribute to the discussion of the problem of historical knowledge. White studies the relationship between literary and historical discourse as he feels that the relation between the two ‘provides a microcosm of modern Western thought’s effort to relate imagination … and commonsense’. (White, Figural Realism, p.ix) He sees the techniques used in both practises as distinctively Western, and as processes of production, rather than of mimesis or reproduction.

White starts his argumentation with a firm emphasis on the use of language. Both White and Kellner posit that we can only access history through language, and its discourse must first be written before we can digest it as history. This process and its discourse can take many different forms, and shows a certain relationship to the past mediated by a certain discourse about it. (p.1) In Figural Realism White states: ‘historical discourses typically produce narrative interpretations of their subject matter’. (p.3) The term ‘historical discourse’ here refers to historical writing. White, like Ankersmit, sees historical narratives as ‘metaphors that provide us not with factual information but with ... “metaphorical insight”’. (Pihlainen, p.40) These writings do not result in any new information; they simply offer interpretations. (White, p.2) This brings literary and historiographical writing closer together, as White argues that these discourses both make use of some of the same narrative techniques.

White offers up the notion of ‘troping’, which is to emplot real events as a story. (p.9) This ‘emplotment’ is the ‘encodation of the facts contained in the chronicle as components of specific kinds of plot structures’. (White, ‘The Historical Text As Literary Artefact’, p.223) He argues that elements such as chronologic ordering do not come natural to events but are added by the historian and depend on cultural ideas. Furthermore, when these events are made into a story there occurs a ‘choice among the many kinds of plot structure’. (Figural Realism, p.9) Lastly, the point a historian wants to make with his work will depend as much upon the plot structure that is used as it does on the events themselves. A narrative, according to White, cannot be seen as a ‘neutral container’ of historical facts. (p.27) White argues that these ‘tropological abductions’ can be found in every historical account. (Figural Realism, p.8) These findings are of special interest to the discussion at hand because as White points out:

Tropology is especially useful for the analysis of narrative historiography because narrative history is a mode of discourse in which the relations between what a given culture regards as literal truths and the figurative truths expressed in its characteristic fictions, the kinds of stories it tells about itself and others, can be tested. (p.18)
Stories about the past will give the careful reader information about how a culture views its own past. What is considered factual about it, what is most important about it, and what kinds of stories have to be told about it.

White addresses the supposed inherent dichotomy present in the term ‘historical narrative’: ‘It is absurd to suppose that, because a historical discourse is cast in the mode of a narrative, it must be mythical, fictional, substantially imaginary, or otherwise “unrealistic” in what it tells us about the world.’ (Figural Realism, p.22) If Half of a Yellow Sun can be considered a historical discourse in the form of a narrative, White argues that its use of a narrative does not automatically mean that it can only be unrealistic; it can still have a factual content. Every story refers to the real world to some extent, and provides the reader with knowledge about it.

In addition, White states that a narrative about the past will not necessarily show the whole past. This refutes Cicero’s second principle: the historian cannot omit any information. One would argue that it is near impossible to show the ‘whole past’, and the question arises whether it is even possible to know it. To be able to know and present each and every factor that contributed to the occurrence of an event seems an impossible claim. Nor will these narratives provide the reader with a definite and clear view of the past. This is a controversial issue: the key question of late nineteenth-century crisis of historicism was: ‘Can we know the past?’. It seems that these writings will produce further discussion, other narratives, and other interpretations. When every narration is essentially an interpretation of the past, then there are as many different versions of the past available to us as there are narratives about it. White argues that one narrative account can represent a certain story in the form of an epic, while another may represent it as a farce; this is a question of emplotment, and not a question of which one is more truthful.

In his essay ‘Truth in History and Literature’ Ankersmit attempts to elaborate on White’s theory by attempting to investigate to what measure the novel can be better understood through historical writing. Ankersmit points out that White’s focus on the literary dimension of historical writing can obscure other possible routes. White argues from the novel to history; Ankersmit wants to ‘move from history to the novel in order to find out about what can or should count as the novel’s truth’. (p.30) He tries to compare these two discourses from a cognitive point of view, and starts his analysis by emphasizing that there is no significant difference in the facts related by the novelist or the historian. Both relate facts, the novelist, however, is concerned with imaginary facts.
As a starting point Ankersmit takes the historical novel, as this genre can be seen as a unifying element between the novel and history. As has been stated before, the factual truth is not sufficient ground to distinguish between the two. Part of the difference lies in how the historical truth is represented. A historian may put more emphasis on explaining and defending their choice and representation of certain sources, while a novelist will not incorporate this in his work. What they do have in common is clearly indicating which elements of the past the reader should focus on.

An important difference is how the historical novel ‘applies the historical knowledge conveyed by a representation of the past to the historical novel’s main characters’. (Ankersmit, p.45) Usually in novels, the past is shown how it was experienced by those people whose names did not survive in the history books, and who could not influence the grand scheme of things. As Ankersmit puts it: ‘The historical novel gives us applied knowledge of the past’. (p.45) This insight can be related directly to Adichie’s novel, as she designed her story to revolve around ordinary people, who were subjugated to the horrors of war without their consent. Whereas the historiographer will focus on the representation of the past, Adichie, being a novelist, has very clearly chosen to apply the past to a group of fictional characters.

Another difference between the historical novel and historical writing is that a historian will be mostly occupied with the explicitness of ‘saying’ what the past was like, in the most unambiguous way possible. A novelist will focus more on the ‘showing’ of the past because he knows that ‘his (historical) novel must be as open and multi-interpretable as reality itself is. For this is what we expect of novels: they give us an epiphany of reality itself.’ (Ankersmit, p.45) The novelist shows his readers what the world is like, but leaves room for the reader’s own interpretation, as they would have in realism. However, this does not mean that the reader is entirely passive when it comes to historical writing. This is where historiography ties up with the historical novel because ‘historical representations will typically escape authorial intention and need interpretation no less than our social and political world itself’. (p.45) Both discourses will attempt to say or show what the past was like.
2.3 Reasons for Writing History

Writing about history can have many various motivations, and these may be very different for a historian as opposed to a fiction writer. *The Stanford Encyclopedia* lists three broad reasons for historical representation:

- The idea of learning some of the facts about human circumstance in the past; the idea of providing a narrative that provides human understanding of how a sequence of historical actions and events hangs together and “makes sense” to us; and the idea of providing a causal account of the occurrence of some historical event of interest.

(Little, part1)

It seems that Adichie does not fall into any of these categories. Her reasons for writing her novel are listed below, and none seem to clearly fit the profile of the historian presented here. However, it seems that there can be no clear demarcation between the identities of the historian and the literary author.

When one takes into account White’s views on historic discourse, a historian and a fiction writer create essentially the same thing: a narrative. Part of the difference seems to lie in their motivation, their intent and their ultimate goal. A historian will try to approach history and his work with at least an objective of adhering to the truth, in as far as this is possible. It is possible that a fiction writer has the very same goal, but in the case of fiction the possible motivations are endless, and may be very different from the truth-objective a historical writer has. In the particular case of Adichie, the first apparent difference between her and a historian would be the goal of her novel. She does not write to represent the Nigeria-Biafra War as objectively as possible; her project is far more personal, and deeply rooted in her individual psyche and life. This also relates back to the Ankersmit’s argumentation about the difference between history and the novel. It is clear that Adichie is mainly interested in the application of history to ordinary people and in an emphasis on ‘showing’ the past.

Adichie sums up her reasons in an interview. (Adichie, ‘The Story Behind the Book’)

She seems to have some reasons for writing in common with a historian: ‘because I grew up in the shadow of Biafra’ and ‘because I wanted to engage with my history in order to make sense of my present, many of the issues that led to the war remain unresolved in Nigeria today’. She is involved in the goal of sense-making of an event. However, in these remarks, her personal involvement is evident. She does not necessarily want to make sense only of the past, but make sense of the relationship between the ‘shadow of Biafra’, which represents her past, and her own personal present. In the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* this reason is
listed for the writing of history: ‘And it [history] suggests the possibility of better understanding ourselves in the present, by understanding the forces, choices, and circumstances that brought us to our current situation.’ (Little, introduction) Consequently, it seems that this is a reason for writing that Adichie has in common with the historian, which is made evident by the quote mentioned above. However, she remains, first and foremost, a literary author.

What Adichie stresses is her and her family’s deep personal involvement in the Nigeria-Biafra War and how the effects it had on her family reverberate in her own life:

because I lost both grandfathers in the Nigeria-Biafra war, … because my father has tears in his eyes when he speaks of losing his father, because my mother still cannot speak at length about losing her father in a refugee camp, because the brutal bequests of colonialism make me angry, because the thought of the egos and indifference of men leading to the unnecessary deaths of men and women and children enrages me, because I don't ever want to forget. (Adichie, ‘The Story Behind the Book’)

This personal involvement is articulated in the novel in the sense that parts of her life are incorporated; she based some of her characters on family members. This novel constitutes a research of a part of her being, of her past. One could argue that this makes her fundamentally different from the historian, but as has already been pointed out, an author can never be entirely absent from his own narration. As Gossman states: ‘Alain Besancon argues that all historical research is in some measure “recherché de soi-même… introspection.”. (Gossman, p.28) A narration is always the result of the interaction between the source and the researcher. Furthermore, the idea of writing about an event to ‘never forget’ links up with the historian’s project, as well as with trauma theory.

One could argue that a historian is more likely to take up the task of remembering for a whole community, while Adichie here presents it as a personal enterprise. While there are traces of nationalism in her reasons it cannot be equated to the historical novel of, for example, Sir Walter Scott that ‘might be seen as a tool for national self-definition’. (de Groot, p.94) Nevertheless, Adichie herself states that she wants to write about Biafra ‘not only to honor my grandfathers, but also to honor the collective memory of an entire nation’. (Adichie, ‘The Story Behind the Book’) In this quote it is possible to find a concern for both the personal and the community, it seems that for Adichie the two are closely intertwined. Hawley argues that Half of a Yellow Sun ‘is a national novel, getting at the spirit of the Nigerian people, recreating that spirit in the specific lives of compelling characters’. (Hawley, p.23)
However, what is foregrounded in the novel is the diversity of African experience, not the unified Nigerian national identity. It can be argued that Adichie interprets this identity by showing so many variant points of views from characters that are different with regards to gender, class, race but are still united in their struggle for Biafra. Nationalism is a personal matter and can have many different interpretations. Adichie herself discusses what ‘African authenticity’ means to her in her essay ‘African “Authenticity” and the Biafran Experience’. She argues we should see Africa as a multidimensional landscape, that cannot be defined in one particular way: ‘I do not accept the idea of monolithic authenticity. To insist that there is one thing that is authentically African is to diminish the African experience.’ This confirms her view on the national identity as being multi-dimensional and very difficult to grasp entirely. (Adichie, ‘African “Authenticity” and the Biafran Experience’, p.48)

De Groot elaborates on how authors of historical fiction tend to write about their own history in so far as they have some kind of ‘ethnographic, sociological, nationalist, geographical claim’ to that past. (de Groot, p.95) Adichie certainly can be said to have each of those claims to the past of Nigeria. She and her family are Igbo; she herself experiences how the different ethnic groups interact with each other today, after the conflict; she belongs to the group who call themselves ‘Nigerian’, and for the largest part of her time she lives in Nigeria. De Groot also lists ‘access to source material, or language problems, or lack of confidence’ as reasons why one would not venture outside of one’s own historical setting. (p.95) It is true that these factors also worked in Adichie’s favor, her family functioned as her source about the war, and she speaks both English as Igbo.

In the novel, the main focus is the personal life and struggles of the characters, not the historical events. It is a character driven story in which personal experience forms the focal point of the tale. Adichie discusses this as well: ‘But what was most important to me, in the end, was emotional truth. I wanted this to be a book about human beings, not a book about faceless political events.’ (Adichie, ‘The Story Behind the Book’) Some branches of history writing are also occupied with the more mundane and everyday life of ordinary people, such as Alltagsgeschichte. Unlike many other authors of Nigerian war fiction, Adichie does not get involved in fictionalizing events about which there are no historical facts available, such as for example, a rendering of the dialogue between two political leaders. She simply gives the point of view of the characters, and the information they would have available to them through the radio and through their intellectual salon. Rather, she uses the historical events to punctuate the lives of the characters. As John Marx notes: ‘throughout the novel, the couple’s [Olanna and Odenigbo] romantic turmoil directly parallels Nigeria’s defining postcolonial
crisis, as well as being punctuated by it’. (Marx, p.612) Both story lines, the political and the personal, at no time threaten to overtake each other but rather complement each other. This shows how Adichie makes the historical and the literary intersect in her novel, as complementary narratives. As Marx points out, with regard to the sciences ‘fiction shapes a counterdiscourse, offers a humanizing counterpoint’. (Marx, p.599) The personal story breathes new life and vitality into the historical ‘facts’ about the past, and by choosing to focus on ordinary people Adichie makes the story more relatable.

Another difference between Adichie and the historiographer is the use and choice of sources. In the Stanford Encyclopedia it is stated that facts form the basis of historical representation: ‘We use facts in the present ... to support inferences about circumstances and people in the past.’ (Little, part1) Adichie also finds her sources in the present, but these would not be considered as factual by the historian. She says: ‘my parents’ stories formed the backbone of my research’ and ‘I read books. I talked to people. ... I would often ask older people I met, “Where were you in 1967?”’ (Adichie, ‘The Story Behind the Book’) She based her story on testimonies of the war, but also on factual resources. However, she herself admits that, while she wanted to adhere to the historical truth of the major events, she let herself stray from the facts, and took some artistic liberty: ‘I have a lot of research notes that I did not end up using because I did not want to be stifled by fact, did not want the political events to overwhelm the human story’. It is clear that in this aspect Adichie’s objective and focus are different from a historian’s; adhering entirely to the factual truth (in so far as this is possible) is something that Adichie deliberately did not pursue. Far more important to her is the emotional truth of the past, how it felt to be there. This is what she used the testimonies for, to get a sense of what it was like to have been there. This is what she wants the novel to convey.

The use of dates, place names and personal names must be discussed here as well, as it is related to the question of adhering to the truth. All these elements would be of critical importance in the historian’s text; these are fundamental facts that give a backbone of veracity and stability to a story. The first element that is of utmost important is the chronology; a historian will link precise dates to certain events. Biafra became an independent republic on 30 May 1967, and one would assume that this date would appear in a novel that revolves around Biafra. It does not appear in Adichie’s novel. The characters’ reaction to the secession is what is described in the novel when the republic of Biafra is proclaimed. It seems that the ways in which they experience this occurrence is of more relevance than the event itself. Furthermore, human beings do not live by precise dates; these are not of direct importance to them in the case of a momentous event. This relates back to the notion of the novel being a
character-driven story in which the emotions and the felt history are the focal point. This, for example, is how the secession is announced: ‘But Odenigbo didn’t need to deliver the letter because the secession was announced that evening’. (Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, p.161) They listen to Ojukwu’s speech on the radio, the speech is transcribed; then the reaction follows: ‘This is our beginning.’ Odenigbo said. … She [Olanna] had wanted the secession to happen, but now it seemed too big to conceive.’ (Half of a Yellow Sun, p.162) Each character has his or her own distinctly personal reaction to the news.

The only markers of time the reader is given in the novel are the two major time periods in which the events take place: the early sixties and the late sixties. This demarcation of time makes sure that ‘the events are not made to occur in vacuo but are located in ‘known’ historical time’. (Nwahunanya, p.5) The novel starts off in the early sixties; the characters are introduced, the scene is set, and their lives intersect. Never is an exact date given, arguably because real people do not think or remember in terms of precise dates. However, the attentive reader can deduce some precise dates from historical events that are mentioned. Such as: ‘They toasted Kenya’s independence’. (Half of a Yellow Sun, p.233) Kenya became independent from Britain on 12 December 1963. Another instance is the death of Winston Churchill: ‘Richard was almost relieved to learn of Sir Winston Churchill’s death’. (Half of a Yellow Sun, p.235) Churchill died on 24 January 1965, and again an important historical event is coupled with the character’s own personal life. Richard is not relieved because Churchill has died, but because of it consequence: he does not have to face his lover Kainene yet.

Where the novel resembles a historian’s account is in the use of place and personal names. Most of the places that are mentioned are real, and are plausible when they are considered in the historical context. Odenigbo and Olanna are both academics, and work at the university in Nsukka. The place names mentioned in the story are places that were important in the course of events that took place during the Nigeria-Biafra War, but in the novel they are important because of the presence of the characters in them. Odenigbo and Olanna have to flee from Nsukka, to Abba, to Umuahia, and finally to Orlu. Port Harcourt was an important city, and its fall was significant in the war. It is significant in the story because Richard and Kainene live there. Street names are also mentioned in the novel; the street Odenigbo and Olanna live on is called Odim street, which is a street that exists near the university in Nsukka. In this way, it would be possible for this couple to have lived there. Adichie explains how she handled the geography of Nigerian in her novel: ‘I invented a train station in Nsukka, invented a beach in Port Harcourt, changed the distance between towns…but I did not invent any of the major events.’ (Adichie, ‘The Story Behind the Book’) She
treats the geographic reality differently than a historian would, this enables her to frame the characters’ experiences in the real world while maintaining her freedom as a literary author to use the surroundings for the development of her characters. The names of important historical figures are maintained in the narrative, Gowon and Ojuwku are frequently mentioned, but also Harold Wilson is mentioned, who was the British prime minister at the time.

According to White, the historian and the fiction writer come together when the historian must transform his study into a written form. The historian has to ‘employ the same strategies of linguistic figuration used by imaginative writers to endow their discourses with the kind of latent, secondary, or connotative meanings that will require that their works be not only received as messages but read as symbolic structures’. (*Figural Realism*, p.8) This is an idea which he derives from Roland Barthes. This ‘latent’ meaning is ‘its interpretation of the events that make up its manifest content’. (*Figural Realism*, p.8) This interpretation is what separates the historical discourse from a list of chronologically ordered events, and what approximates it to narrative fiction. This also refers to what White calls ‘emplotment’, the events are integrated into a plot structure. This relates back to the way in which the personal events punctuate and parallel the political ones in the novel. Adichie uses the personal to make the political *felt*. Olanna’s and Odenigbo’s wedding, for example, is also the moment of the first bombing of the town of Umuahia: ‘Ugwu heard the sound just before they cut their cake in the living room, the swift wah-wah-wah roar in the sky.’ (*Half of a Yellow Sun*, p.202) Just as she seemed to let the emotional response to the announcement of the secession take preference over the event itself, here the ruining of the wedding is more important to the characters than the occurrence of the bombing. These two events will always be remembered together by them, just because the bombing occurred at a moment of pivotal importance in their lives. By combining the personal and the political or historical in this way, Adichie makes the political developments of the war part of the characters felt personal history.

To conclude the analysis of Adichie as a historical novelist, and the investigation of how Adichie uses the novel to reflect on the intersection of literature and history writing, one must acknowledge the different contact points between the two, and recognize that *Half of a Yellow Sun* is a historical novel. As Chinyere Nwahunanya points out: ‘The historical novelist combines the techniques of the historian (documentation) and that of the novelist (imaginative re-creation of the events) in the fictional evocation of the past.’ (p.2) In the novel, there is careful attention to fiction writing as an art. This can be recognized in the way in which the plot is built up, the way in which the dialogue is constructed, and how each character is drawn with careful attention to each detail. Adichie documents the Nigeria-Biafra War, but the story
revolves around how this particular period in time was experienced by the characters. Adichie uses the different characters to demonstrate that there are as many versions of reality as there are people to interpret it; she uses her novel to show these different dimensions of one and the same period in time. Furthermore, by combining history and literary writing, Adichie enables herself to engage with the deep personal connection she has to the Nigeria-Biafra War. In this sense, the novel might have a therapeutic effect for her. After all, as White points out, the discourse of history needs to be written first, before it can be digested. This novel is a personal project for Adichie but it also contains a concern for the entire Igbo community, as the final words of the novel show: ‘May we always remember’. (Half of a Yellow Sun, ‘Author’s Note’) Adichie uses the intersections of history and literature to keep the past in the present, to keep it alive, and also to make the historical and political history felt.
3. THE OWNERSHIP AND AUTHORSHIP OF HISTORY IN HALF OF A YELLOW SUN

3.1 Introduction

The question of authorship, and its relationship to history, is one of the central issues in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Adichie’s position with regard to the historian and historical novelist has been discussed extensively in the second chapter. In addition, Adichie has worked this issue into her novel by creating the characters Ugwu and Richard Churchill. Both are from very different backgrounds; they each represent two opposite views on life. Ugwu comes from a small village, Opi, and he leaves it to come to Nsukka and work for Odengibo. Richard is an Englishman who has come to Nigeria to study Igbo-Ukwu art. They are the two authors in the novel; it is through them that Adichie tries to make a point about who history belongs to and who should write about it. Ugwu is the writer of ‘The Book’, which is a historical account from the time period from the British colonization to the Nigeria-Biafra War. Adichie uses The Book to voice her own views on history, who should write it, and how it is constructed. These questions are complicated further in the African context because of the presence of the white colonizer who has had a decisive influence on the dominant narrative about the continent and its history.

3.2 The Ownership of History

One of the elements that stands in a direct relationship to the questions of authorship and ownership is the metanarrative of The Book, which is integrated into the novel. There are excerpts from this book inserted at regular intervals in the main story. They appear typically at the end of a chapter, and the final part of the late sixties constitutes a larger gap in the intervals between the excerpts. This is the part where a lot of formative events happen for the character Ugwu, who is the author of The Book. Hence, this may be the reason for the larger gap, as these events are formative for Ugwu as a writer. For much of the novel, the reader is meant to believe that Richard Churchill is the author of The Book. Only on the very last page the real author is revealed: Ugwu. There are various reasons for this mistaken identity: Richard is presented as a struggling writer, he is fascinated by the Igbo culture and history, he is the one that decides on the title: ‘The World Was Silent When We Died’, and he has an academic background. There are also various reasons why the reader would believe Ugwu *not* to be the author: he seems to be rather unknowing about the political and economical issues of
Nigeria, he cannot read or write well when he arrives at Odenigbo’s house, and his status as a	houseboy does not make him the most evident candidate for the position as author of a
historical book.

The opposition between these two characters raises the question of ‘who has the
authoritative voice to represent the history of Africa?’ Its history has been preserved by a
multitude of voices and sources, from the African unwritten sources and memory, which
includes storytelling and the oral tradition, to the oppressive voice of the colonizer. After the
Nigerian independence of 1960, African intellectuals argued that the African people needed to
take back their own history, out of the colonizer’s grip. The confusion about the author of The
Book is a device Adichie uses to put emphasis on the fact that in the colonial era Africa’s
history had become a topic for the white colonizer. During this time, Africa was presented as
the ‘dark continent’ with no history that was worth mentioning. Ugwu is doing what Chinua
Achebe did before him: taking back the right to his own history, and trying to present it in his
words and on paper. Richard is writing to compensate for his ‘(post) colonial neurosis’, and is
therefore writing in a colonial context. (Masterson, p.144) Even though he tries his hardest to
become an integral part of the Biafran culture and its people, he always remains an outsider.

Through the entire course of the novel, Richard is struggling to write the novel that
will connect him to the African tradition, he is fascinated by Igbo-Ukwu art, and his novel
goes through different titles, all referring to the Igbo past and culture: The Basket of Hands,
and In the Time of Roped Pots. But his search results in the realization that he himself is still
the result of colonial prejudice, as the poet Okeoma points out after Richard commented on
the complex Igbo art of the ninth century: ‘You sound surprised, as if you never imagined
these people [Igbo people] capable of such things.’ (Half of a Yellow Sun, p.111) Richard is
very troubled by the remark, and does not consider himself to be influenced by any prejudice.
As he learns to speak Igbo, and gets further integrated into the Igbo culture, he begins to
consider himself as a Biafran: ‘We are still extracting from some fields we control in
Egbema.’ (Half of a Yellow Sun, p.372) But in the end he realizes: ‘The war isn’t my story to
tell, really.’ (p.425) Something that Ugwu had always known: ‘Ugwu nodded. He had never
thought that it was.’ (p.425)

In this way, Richard has a symbolical role for Adichie. As he ‘gradually finds himself
paralyzed for words, in his place Ugwu rises up as the historian far more suited for the task’.
(Hawley, p.21) Ugwu borrowed the title of The Book ‘The World Was Silent When We Died’
from Richard, who got it from something Colonel Madu said to him: ‘The world has to know
the truth of what is happening, because they simply cannot remain silent while we die.’ (Half
Colonel Madu asked Richard to write articles for the Propaganda Directorate, and Richard accepts, this becomes the way in which he makes his contribution. The line stays with him, so he decides to use it for his book which he later gives up. It is worth noting that the title which he ultimately decides on comes from an indigenous Nigerian, and not from himself.

Whereas Richard found writing such a struggle, for Ugwu it seems to be the next logical step in his life, and he seems to have a far more natural relationship to the material he writes about. As he starts writing he tries out different things, neither poetry nor his own love story works out, but when he writes about the war, the words seem to sound right. However, his writings also stem from an experience he had in the war which had a large impact on his life. Ugwu raped a girl, but this event will be discussed in more detail later. By presenting Ugwu as the only one suited to write the story of Biafra, Adichie validates her own role as a writer and shows the different ways in which history can be preserved. Hawley argues that ‘[t]he Biafra War, though a war she [Adichie] has not personally experienced, is her legacy, and its telling arguably her duty’. (Hawley, p.21) Adichie herself affirms that she ‘feel[s] a real sense of connection with the country [Nigeria]’ and with the people, so this may account for putting the story of the war in the hands in the indigenous Nigerian Ugwu, rather than the British Richard from overseas. (Adichie, ‘I left home to find home’) She herself acknowledges this, that by making Ugwu the writer of The Book, she ‘wanted to make a strongly-felt political point about who should be writing the stories of Africa’. (Adichie, ‘The Story Behind the Book’) Adichie uses her novel as a way to deal with the past of Nigeria, which is also her past. She does this by showing her view on how the roles should be divided. Her opinion on who should write history of Nigeria resonates through the entire novel, and finally comes full circle in the revelation of Ugwu as the writer of The Book.

### 3.3 The Writing of History

#### 3.3.1 The Book

Returning to the excerpts from The Book, which is in essence a historical account of the time period from the British colonization to the Nigeria-Biafra War. Each has a different perspective, but they form a coherent narrative. John Marx discusses this in his essay ‘Failed-State Fiction’, and I will draw on his essay in this discussion. (Marx, pp.615-616) Ugwu is not only a historian, he writes about various aspects that concern the way in which the Nigeria-
Biafra War came about. This reflects reality, as history had many different dimensions. History is being preserved by people who come from a variety of disciplines, not only historians, but also creative writers and archaeologists. By constructing The Book is this manner, Adichie again emphasizes the multi-perspectivism of reality and history. Ugwu approaches Nigeria’s past from many different angles, showing that there are as many interpretations as there are angles. This is the same narrative strategy Adichie uses in the entire novel. In this way, Ugwu also occupies an intermediary position as historian/ novelist, just like Adichie does. In some passages of The Book, Ugwu uses strategies that Ankersmit categorizes as pertaining to the historian, such as an emphasis on ‘saying’ in the passages that focus more on the economical and political past. However, he also uses strategies that pertain to the novelist, as he puts emphasizes ‘showing’ in other passages that focus more on the human, personal aspect of the past. He, like Adichie, uses the felt history to punctuate the political and economical events.

The first excerpt describes the prologue of The Book: ‘For the prologue, he recounts the story of the woman with the calabash’. *(Half of a Yellow Sun, p.82)* It functions like a ‘memoir of witnessing’, as it describes how Olanna gives testimony to Ugwu about what she witnessed on the train. *(Marx, p.616)* In this passage, the focus is on ‘showing’; reality is open to the reader’s interpretation. Here The Book also deals with the ‘applied’ knowledge of the past. The first excerpt includes a description of the cover of the book, which is a map. This is significant as well and will be discussed further on in this chapter. The second excerpt focuses on the colonial aspect of how Nigeria was formed: ‘In 1914, the governor-general joined the North and the South, and his wife picked a name. Nigeria was born.’ *(Half of a Yellow Sun, p.115)* A fourth discusses the economy of Nigeria that was inexistent until independence, and a fifth discusses the starvation that reigned in Biafra during the war. The sixth excerpt describes the international reactions, or the lack thereof to the Biafran Republic. These passages focus more on ‘saying’, in an unambiguous way: this is what it was like. The seventh excerpt represents the epilogue, which is a poem Ugwu wrote, modelled after a poem by Okeoma. Lastly, the eighth excerpt only consists of one line: ‘Ugwu writes his dedication last: *For Master, my good man;*’ which ends the novel. *(Half of a Yellow Sun, p.433)* It is through this line that the reader finally comes to the realization that Ugwu is in fact the author of The Book.

As a writer, Ugwu approaches the war from a lot of different angles: from a personal point of view, a historical, economical, political, international one, and a poetic one. This mirrors Adichie’s approach to her novel. Like Adichie, Ugwu mixes the personal and the
political, with the inclusion of Olanna’s anecdote about the woman with the calabash. *(Half of a Yellow Sun, p.82)* As de Groot points out, historical writing can take place within many different genres. Marx approaches this from another angle: ‘In assigning the fictional authorfunction to the unlikely Ugwu, *Half of a Yellow Sun* satisfies a craving for unity invoked by that range of sources in Adichie’s “Note.” *(Marx, p.616)* In the ‘Author’s Note’, Adichie gives thanks to all the people and sources who helped her in the composition of her novel. She also makes use of the excerpts from The Book to show a different side of the beginning of the war, a beginning more detached from the central characters of the novel, and events which took place on a bigger scope, such as how the Nigerian leaders handled the economic situation at the time of independence. It also allows a reassessment of the supposed homogeneity of Nigeria. Furthermore, The Book functions as a ‘device to anchor the reader who may not necessarily know the basics of Nigerian history’. *(Adichie, ‘The Story Behind the Book’)*

Adichie shows how historical writing is influenced by human intervention by making Ugwu the author of The Book. Kellner also emphasizes this human influence, as he views the historian as actively involved in the process of history-making. Adichie indicates how Ugwu makes use of a narrative to tell the story of Nigeria, this links up with the ideas put forward by White, that the historian is involved in a ‘poetic act’. Ugwu uses language to access his own and Nigeria’s past, White argues one can only access the past through language. How he engages with the past is apparent from the form he uses, and has been discussed above. Ugwu’s writings do not supply us with any new information, but it does give us his interpretation of the past, and of how the past should be represented. The literary dimension of Ugwu’s historical writing lies in his use of narrative strategies. Ugwu ‘emplots’ the historical events in a certain chronological and causal order. All this shows that Adichie is aware of how history is digested and constructed, and of how she herself uses narrative devices to construct her own story.

### 3.3.2 The Author

Ugwu is one of the most important and interesting characters of the novel, one of the reasons for this is the evolution he goes through in the course of the story. The reader is introduced to a thirteen year old house boy in the first chapter, and is left at the end with a changed *man*. In this way, the novel is also a *Bildungsroman*. This term originated in Germany, and implies a story of psychological and moral change in a character who evolves from youth to adulthood.
It may also involve a change of environment, from a provincial to an urban one. All these elements are present in Ugwu, he leaves the village in Opi where he was born to come to Nsukka. It is clear that this is the first time he has left his village: ‘He had never seen anything like the streets that appeared after they went past the university gates.’ (Half of a Yellow Sun, p.3) He is entirely new to this world: ‘On and off and on and off until he was laughing at the magic of the running water’. (Half of a Yellow Sun, p.6)

An important factor in his evolution is the education he receives under the tutelage of Odenigbo, who is an intellectual and works at the university. He gives Ugwu books to read, and sends Ugwu back to school, where he makes quick progress. Over the course of time, Ugwu becomes part of the family Odenigbo and Olanna create. Odenigbo organizes intellectual soirees at his house, and Ugwu loves to listen to discussions, even though most of the time he does not know what they are talking about. The topics discussed in this intellectual salon range from whether or not there exists ‘one’ African race to the opinions of Hegel on Africa. (Half of a Yellow Sun, p.20 & p.50) However, these are formative experiences for him, which build his consciousness of the state of Nigerian and the world. In this way, the novel ‘performs a makeover on the home, which appears less as a private venue for the generation of public individuals than, alternatively, as the setting for a kind of ad hoc professional training’. (Marx, p.611) His time at the house will form his personality, but it will also decide what kind of writer he will become. The importance of education is always emphasized, Odenigbo is very passionate about it: ‘Education is a priority! How can we resist exploitation if we don’t have the tools to understand exploitation?’ (Half of a Yellow Sun, p.11)

The authority to write about the history of Nigeria was put into the hands of Ugwu, who has no academic background. That it was not given to someone like Odenigbo, may lead to the following insights. The novel seems to imply a ‘redivision of power, those with a university degree are not automatically the most knowledgeable’. (Marx, p.622) Furthermore, the worth of experience seems to be esteemed higher than mere book smarts. Lastly, the dedication of The Book written by Ugwu: ‘For Master, my good man’ confirms the worth of the ‘mentoring model’; in dedicating his book to Odenigbo Ugwu recognizes his crucial role in the creation of his book. (Marx, p.618)

One of the most influential moments of Ugwu’s life is his time in the army. From the start of the war, he feels drawn to the life of a soldier. He wants to make a difference: ‘He wanted to play a role, to act. To win the war. … Yet it seemed that the war had ended too soon and he had not contributed’. (Half of a Yellow Sun, p.199) He makes his contribution by
teaching children in the backyard of their house with Olanna. This helps him to escape the
draft the first time he was conscripted. But he does not escape a second time. His life in the
army is not described in much detail, but Ugwu seems to be a successful soldier; he gets the
nickname ‘Target Destroyer’. (p.362) However, it all seems to be too much for him, and he
feels overwhelmed: ‘Ugwu’s head ached. Everything was moving so fast. He was not living
his life; life was living him.’ (p.364) Much to the reader’s surprise, when the soldiers go to a
bar after a battle Ugwu participates in the gang rape of a bar girl. The rape is described in a
very direct way, and it seems that Ugwu is not present during it at all. He does not look at the
girl’s face, and feels a ‘self-loathing release’ (p.365) after he climaxes. Afterwards he does
look at her, and ‘she stared back at him with a calm hate’, which is an image that will haunt
him. (p.365)

Later Ugwu gets injured in battle, and while he recovers he keeps dreaming about the
girl’s eyes: ‘He woke up hating the image and hating himself. He would give himself time to
atone for what he had done.’ (Half of a Yellow Sun, p.397) He makes amends by writing his
book; he essentially ‘atones for his act by inheriting Richard’s role as a writer’. (Cooper,
p.133) This goes to show how Ugwu’s authority of authorship is rooted in his first-hand
experience in the war; he is an ‘expert whose authority derives from an intimate relation to his
object of study’. (Marx, p.617) He experienced the war firsthand, on the battlefield. This is
the essential difference between him and Richard, and him and the participants of Odenigbo’s
salon. Marx argues that ‘Ugwu is not in charge of his own development. The memory of the
rape helps make Ugwu into a writer. He writes in order to repress.’ (Marx, p.619) Ugwu is
shaped by his experiences, which determine who he is and where his life will lead him next.
But as Hewett points out: ‘Claiming a voice is an internal act that results from tapping into the
authority derived from an individual’s lived experience’. (Hewett, p.88) His experiences make
him into a writer, but the voice he utters is entirely his own. I would argue to see the act of
writing more as a ‘digestion’ of the past, a concept brought forward by White. The discourse
of the past must first be written before it can be digested as history.

Moreover, the rape shows that in times of war, the line between perpetrator and victim
is never as clear as an outsider would believe it to be. It is possible to lose yourself in extreme
situations, but this will be discussed further in the chapter on trauma in literature. Brenda
Cooper claims that Ugwu’s ‘participation in the group rape potentially plays into Western
stereotypes of the African continent as a savage place of unnatural violence’. (Cooper, p.133)
While this is a real possibility, the violence in the novel is then countered by the creative act
of writing, and the fact that Ugwu is a full, well-rounded character in the eyes of the reader. He is not only African.

Another important element of Ugwu’s time in the army is the novel which he reads while he is there: *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave: Written by Himself.* (*Half of a Yellow Sun*, p.360) This is a memoir which was published in 1845, and is written by a former slave of that period. It is considered as one of the most famous books of its kind, and it was very important to the abolitionist movement. The novel is of importance to Ugwu because Frederick Douglass represents the voice of the repressed subject that answers back to his oppressor, and it may have contributed to Ugwu’s awareness and confidence in his own voice. He finishes the book in two days, and it is very important to him. This is made evident by his reaction when High-Tech, a child soldier, rips out one of the pages of the book to roll a joint: ‘Rage pumped through Ugwu. His slap was swift, powerful, furious.’ (p.364)

The first title Ugwu had for The Book was “Narrative of the Life of a Country”. It clearly echoes the title of Douglass’ novel, but Ugwu chooses to change the focus. The book is dear to him: ‘I wish I had that Frederick Douglass book.’ (p.424)

The cover of The Book is chosen by Ugwu himself; he chooses to put a map of Nigeria on the front. ‘For the book cover, though, he draws a map of Nigeria and traces in the Y shape of the rivers Niger and Benue in bright red.’ (*Half of a Yellow Sun*, p.82) The Niger is the most important river in West-Africa and the Benue is its major tributary. This means that in addition to showing the borders which the colonial oppressor made, Ugwu also shows the natural borders. He also traces the border of Biafra: ‘He uses the same shade of red to circle the boundaries of where, in the Southeast, Biafra existed for three years’. (p.82) Thus, there are three kinds of borders depicted on the cover, and Ugwu seems to draw a parallel between the natural one and the one of Biafra. The mapping of Africa and Nigeria by the British was a way to attempt to conquer and govern the land. It is also a strategy to turn unknown territory into a place governed by western conventions, because after the colonization the land was divided to suit the British’ needs and wishes. The borders of Nigeria give a false impression of coherence.

By drawing his map in this way, Ugwu uses the conventions the colonizer put in place, and to some extent accepts them. But he shows the natural and Biafran border with more prominence than the Nigerian one. This seems to imply that, while he cannot do away with the colonizer’s border, there are more important and valid divisions of the land. The map may also have a relationship to the question ‘Where is Biafra?’, which was posed by the Canadian prime minister. (*Half of a Yellow Sun*, p.258) This question reflects the position many of the
countries of the world took in relation to the newly-formed republic of Biafra, and Ugwu clearly shows where it lies on the map. Odenigbo is the one who shows Ugwu the first map of the world he had ever seen. This is the comment he accompanies it with: ‘This is our world, although the people who drew this map decided to put their own land on top of ours.’ (p.10) This shows that it seems to be impossible to talk about Nigeria without accepting or at least mentioning the conventions that the colonizer put in place.

Adichie also engages with the topic of the colonial influence in the rest of her novel. The Book allows her to approach the post-colonial era from a different angle, one where the emphasis is more on the political and economical context. When one examines modern-day African society, the influence the colonial period had is apparent. As a post-colonial writer, her novel is shaped by ‘the desire to understand the consequences of the colonial moment’. (Gikandi, p.54) As a writer, she is concerned with the nature of African society, and in this society the influence of colonial rule cannot be ignored. Adichie is located ‘both inside and outside colonial culture’. (Gikandi, p.57) Seeing as she cannot or will not write entirely independent of colonialism she ‘interrogates European discourses and discursive strategies from a privileged position within (and between) two worlds’. (Tiffin, p.95) She validates a strong African identity by making Ugwu the rightful owner and writer of The Book.

The language Adichie uses in her novel is a clear indicator of her status within two worlds. Being within two worlds is a privileged position, because it provides her with the freedom to engage with both cultures, and also with two languages. Language is a ‘fundamental site of struggle for post-colonial discourse because the colonial process itself begins with language’. (The Post-Colonial Studies Reader, Language: Introduction) Some writers, like Ngugi Wa Thion’o, would rather use the English language in their writing and validate the indigenous languages above all. Adichie makes use of the English language, intermixed with Igbo phrases and words. Again, this points to her intermediary position, in-between two worlds. Post-colonial writers often use English as a subversive strategy; they accept this tool the colonizer has given them and use it to reject the ‘political power of the standard language’. (p.284) The English used by Adichie seems to be influenced by the circumstances and the environment in which it is used, and therefore is a very different English than the one brought to Africa by the colonizer.
4. HALF OF A YELLOW SUN AND POSTCOLONIAL TRAUMA

4.1 Introduction

Trauma as a field of study goes back to the early twentieth century, which is the time when Sigmund Freud developed his theory of psychoanalysis. He was the one who changed the meaning of the term ‘trauma’ from indicating ‘physical injury’ to ‘psychological injury’. His theory started with the study of the cause of neurosis in hysterical women. In the mid 1990s, trauma theory had a revival; theorists such as Cathy Caruth used Freud’s theory as a basis to construct their own ideas on trauma. Other important names in this area of study are Dominick LaCapra, Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman. These theories focus on the psychological effects of the Holocaust in the long term, especially in the late twentieth century.

The Holocaust was a traumatic experience for a whole generation of survivors, and it touched a lot of people’s lives in a very drastic way. The effects of this trauma on the following generations was also studied; the way in which a trauma can be transmitted from parents to children, and even from grandparents to grandchildren. However, this focus on the Holocaust does not make this theory entirely specific to this particular traumatic event, it can also be applied to other traumas, such as slavery or postcolonial trauma. This must be done with the necessary caution and careful attention to the differences between the Holocaust and the particular postcolonial trauma. Critics such as Abigail Ward, Sam Durrant, and Amy Novak have addressed the problems that the application of trauma theory to postcolonial narratives may pose.

In the case of Half of a Yellow Sun, trauma theory can be applied on two different levels of the novel: on the level of the author, and on the level of the narration. Adichie is involved in the trauma of her parents and grandparents, who were traumatized directly by the events of the Nigeria-Biafra War. Adichie inherited their trauma, and this novel is her interpretation of their past, and of her own trauma. This phenomenon has been discussed by scholars such as Eva Hoffman, Marianne Hirsch, Melvin Jules Bukiet and Susan Suleiman. Adichie is a witness to the testimonies of those who experienced the traumatic events firsthand. She mentions this in interviews: ‘My parents’ stories formed the backbone of my research [for Half of a Yellow Sun]’ (Adichie, ‘The Story Behind the Book’) In the narrated story, the characters are faced with traumatic experiences. Olanna witnesses the slaughtered bodies of her niece Arize, her Aunty Ifeka and her Uncle Mbazi. A man called Nnaemeka is
shot before the eyes of Richard, and Ugwu is faced with the horrors of war, and a trauma of his own doing: he rapes a girl.

### 4.2 Adichie’s Trauma

#### 4.2.1 Postmemory

The notion of ‘postmemory’ is of particular importance when Adichie’s own trauma is being investigated. ‘Postmemory’ is a term coined by Hirsch whose work centres on memory and the Holocaust. For her work on postmemory, Hirsch drew on Hoffman’s theory of memory. Hoffman first spoke of the ‘hinge generation’. Adichie is part of this generation which Hoffman describes as ‘the second generation after every calamity’. (Hoffman, p.xv) Hirsch defines postmemory as follows: ‘Postmemory describes the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right.’ (Hirsch, ‘The Generation of Postmemory’, p.103) It ‘characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are displaced by the stories of the previous generation, shaped by traumatic events that they can neither understand nor re-create’. (Hirsch, ‘Projected Memory’, p.8) In her analysis of the phenomenon ‘postmemory’, Hirsch uses the Holocaust as her historical frame of reference but, as she states: ‘My analysis relies on and ... is relevant to numerous other contexts of traumatic transfer that can be understood as postmemory.’ (‘The Generation of Postmemory’, p.108) Adichie is part of the ‘second generation’, she is the daughter of survivors. She was not alive at the moment of the Nigeria-Biafra War, but it is an event that permeates her life: ‘I grew up in the shadow of Biafra. ... I have always known that I would write a novel about Biafra.’ (Adichie, ‘The Story Behind the Book’)

Of course, the so-called ‘memories’ that Adichie would have about these events are entirely different from those of her parents; she has no lived experience of them. Hirsch indicates that the ‘post’ of ‘postmemory’ tries to define both a ‘specifically inter- and trans-generational act of transfer and the resonant after-effects of trauma’. (‘The Generation of Postmemory’, p.106) The second generation only remember these events through images, stories and behaviour of those with whom they grew up with. Adichie affirms this when listing her reasons for writing *Half of a Yellow Sun*: ‘because my father has tears in his eyes when he speaks of losing his father, because my mother still cannot speak at length about
losing her father in a refugee camp. (Adichie, ‘The Story Behind the Book) These stories of her parents made a decisive impression on her. As Hirsch puts it: ‘These “not memories” communicated in “flashes of imagery” and “broken refrains”, transmitted through “the language of the body” are precisely the stuff of postmemory.’ (“The Generation of Postmemory’, p.109) This quote emphasizes once more how postmemory does not indicate ‘memory’ in the traditional sense, but memories passed down through images and behaviour. Hirsch points out that: ‘it [postmemory] creates where it cannot recover. It imagines what it cannot recall.’ (Hirsch, ‘Past Lives: Postmemories in Exile’, p.422) In this sense, the novel seems to be the perfect way to deal with postmemory, because the creative act is central to it.

As Hirsch indicates, the ‘post’ in postmemory not only indicates a temporal distance or an aftermath, it also points to ‘an uneasy oscillation between continuity and rupture’. (‘The Generation of Postmemory’, p.106) A position ‘in between’ the past and the present, with a gaze facing backwards. This has also been discussed by Andreas Huyssen. All of Adichie’s reasons for writing the story of Biafra present the event like, what Huyssen calls, a ‘present past’. (Huyssen, ‘Present Pasts’) He argues that, whereas in the earlier part of the twentieth century Western society’s gaze was directed towards the future, recently is has turned to the past. Huyssen calls this ‘one of the most surprising cultural and political phenomena of recent years’. (p.21) This ‘culture of memory’ has become a widespread phenomenon, and it applies to countries all over the world; it is a culture Adichie is a part of. (p.25) Huyssen also mentions a ‘fear, even a terror, of forgetting’ that triggers this culture of memory. (p.28) Adichie wrote this novel to ensure the continuing remembrance of the Nigeria-Biafra War, so the fear of forgetting can be counted amongst one of her motives for writing. However, it is not her only reason. She is also concerned with the intersections between history and literature, the construction of reality, and the act of narrating.

An important distinction between different kinds of memory has been made by Jan and Aleida Assmann. (‘The Generation of Postmemory, p.110) Jan Assmann distinguishes two kinds of collective remembrance: ‘communicative’ memory, which is the memory of the direct witnesses that can be passed down following generations, and ‘cultural’ memory, which Aleida Assmann divided further into national/ political memory and cultural/ archival memory. Jan Assmann adds that as the ‘communicative’ memory gets passed down, there is an increasing ‘wish to institutionalize memory, whether in traditional archives or book or though ritual’. (p.110) This wish applies to Adichie, as she writes a book about the events passed down to her. Aleida Assmann states that ‘the family is a privileged site of memorial transmission’; this is also the case for Adichie. (p.110) The familial place was where she
heard the stories that led her to write *Half of a Yellow Sun*. The story of her parents was the foundation for her own story. She spoke and listened to other people, but it seems that these stories are situated more in the background for Adichie.

Lastly, Hirsch indicates she sees postmemorial work as ‘striv[ing] to reactivate and reembody more distant social/ national and archival/ cultural memorial structures by reinvesting them with resonant individual and familial forms of mediation and aesthetic expression’. (‘The Generation of Postmemory’, p.111) This is exactly what is at stake in Adichie’s project, although in a more indirect manner. She discusses a historical and political truth, the Nigeria-Biafra War, but the personal story forms the core of the novel. *Half of a Yellow Sun* is not overtly about her own family, but it is based on their experiences. However, a great deal of the novel comes from the author’s imagination; it represents an important artistic expression for her.

Not only the presence of her parents’ stories was important for Adichie, but also the absence of her grandfathers. She dedicates her novel to them in the epigraph:

My grandfathers, whom I never knew, Nwoye David Adichie and Aro-Nweke Felix Odigwe, did not survive the war. My grandmothers, Nwabuodu Regina Odigwe and Nwamgbafor Agnes Adichie, remarkable women both, did. This book is dedicated to their memories: *ka fa nodu na ndokwa*. And to Mellitus, wherever he may be.

Their non-presence in her childhood can be seen as a bodily absence which influenced her; their death was a trauma that was passed down to her through her parents, as shows the following quote ‘because my father has tears in his eyes when he speaks of losing his father, because my mother still cannot speak at length about losing her father in a refugee camp’. (Adichie, ‘The Story Behind the Book’) Mellitus, who is mentioned in the epigraph lastly, is the name of Adichie’s parents’ houseboy during the war. She mentions this in an interview when she states that the character of Ugwu was partly based on Mellitus; she knows about Mellitus through her mother’s stories: ‘When my mom spoke about Mellitus, what a blessing he was, … I remember being moved but also thinking that he could not possibly have been the saint my mother painted, that he must have been flawed and human.’ (Adichie, ‘The Story Behind the Book’) This a clear example of how her mother’s memories were passed down to Adichie, and how she made them her own by creating the character of Ugwu. It has become clear by now that the inherited ‘post’memory is not the same as the memory of the ‘eye’witness, in this particular case Adichie’s mother; it is mediated in various ways.
4.2.2 Testimony

One of the mechanisms through which trauma is transferred from one generation or person to the next is empathic unsettlement, a term used by LaCapra. LaCapra is a historian who focuses on the Holocaust, and on how trauma is represented in history. Empathic unsettlement is a notion which LaCapra applies primarily to the historian and his relationship to a historic event, but it may also shed some light on Adichie’s relationship to her past and to the stories of her parents. LaCapra defines empathic unsettlement as follows:

The role of empathy and empathic unsettlement in the attentive secondary witness ... involves a kind of virtual experience through which one puts oneself in the other’s position while recognizing the difference of that position and hence not taking the other’s place. (LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, p.78)

This implies that, as the listener hears the witness’ account, this listener becomes a secondary witness; he or she becomes a witness to the act of bearing witness. However, it is of vital importance that the secondary witness does not put himself in the place of the actual witness; this is called a ‘vicarious experience’. When this happens, the listener loses sight of the boundary between himself and the subject. Adichie seems to have taken part in empathic unsettlement; she heard these stories when she was young, inherited the memories, but never believes that she herself has experienced or will experience these traumatic events.

For LaCapra, the concept of empathic unsettlement also creates a necessary ‘barrier to closure in discourse and places in jeopardy harmonizing or spiritually uplifting accounts of extreme events from which we attempt to derive reassurance of a benefit’. (*Writing History*, p.41-42) Here LaCapra addresses the need of some critics to extract a positive meaning out of limit events, such as the Holocaust or the Nigeria-Biafra War. With regard to *Half of a Yellow Sun*, it can be stated that Adichie does not fit into this category. No overtly negative or positive statement can be discerned in the novel: Adichie is not trying to render the Nigeria-Biafra War as a life-giving event for the Nigerians. Nor is there a need to inject the story with an overly optimistic message.
4.3 *Half of a Yellow Sun* and Trauma

Trauma symptoms seem to resemble (post)modern literary techniques such as, repetition, focalization, lacunae, confusion, open or undecided endings, and disrupted chronology.\(^1\) In novels dealing with trauma there is often a repetition of the same scenes from different points of view, this shows the disbelief in one universal, reachable truth. Authors no longer try to discover the one truth, as they believe it does not exist. There can be confusion about certain facts, often caused by different interpretations; the past as a whole is no longer attainable in a straightforward way. In a lot of cases, the chronology of the story is also disrupted. The order of scenes could be scrambled, or traumatic experiences can be hard to situate in a clearly defined timeframe because they seem to have taken place in a temporal vacuum.

These traumatic symptoms appear in the literature of the second and third generation, but in an alternative form. Here the predominant characteristics are mediation, use of myth and fairy tales, the presence of a quest, unreliable narrators, and the failure of language. The presence of different versions of the past which are heavily mediated ties up with the view of the past as being unreachable. Some of these techniques are present in Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun* as she tries to get across the trauma of the war. As I have stated before, the majority of these theories was developed in relation to the Holocaust, so a careful approach with keen attention to the details is the preferred mode of investigation here. This theory may be transferred to a postcolonial context, but some elements will need to be adjusted. It will become clear that Adichie uses some of the elements listed, but in some cases she applies them in a different manner or not at all.

4.3.1 *African Context*

The relationship between colonization and psychology is not a straightforward one. Ward comments on this in her contribution to *The Routledge Companion to Postcolonial Studies*. Ward is a scholar who is occupied with postcolonial studies, and writes about ‘psychological formulations’ for this volume. (Ward, pp.190-201) Ward draws on Sam Durrant to clarify the central paradox which lies at the heart of certain postcolonial works:

> Postcolonial narrative, which addresses the individual reader both in his or her singularity and as a member of wider communities, is caught between these two

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\(^1\) This idea was put forward in the course on 3rd-generational American fiction taught by Dr. Codde.
commitments: its transformation of the past into a narrative is simultaneously an attempt to summon the dead and lay them to rest. (Durrant, p.9)

It is said that psychoanalysis is mostly occupied with moving beyond the trauma of the past. Nicola King attempts to clarify this tension further as she points out how ‘traumatic historical events seem to demand re-representation and re-reading, to resist the memorialisation which is also a kind of forgetting, the forgetting that assumes that remembering is finished’. (King, p.180) Adichie also seems to struggle with this paradox as she seeks to exorcise the ghosts of her past, but at the same time pleads for an ongoing active remembering of the past. She negotiates this paradox as she tries to make sense of her present. In this way, as Ward points out, ‘the aims of postcolonial thought may sometimes share a conflictual relationship with the objectives of psychological discourses’. (Ward, p.190)

The tension between Western psychoanalysis and postcolonial narratives may be further intensified by the supposed Eurocentrism of the former. Psychology did not emerge in a ‘social vacuum’, as Hussein Abdilahi Bulhan points out, the discipline is determined and deeply enshrined within a culture that colonized the very same culture we would apply it to. (Ward, p.191) We cannot ignore this, but it must also not make the theory entirely redundant. Ward points out that ‘Bulhan also acknowledges that in order to understand the drive for, and effects of, colonization it is imperative to study this past from a psychological viewpoint’. (p.191) While we have to be careful when applying trauma theory to postcolonial trauma, and have to acknowledge the difference between the two contexts, we must also recognize the use of this theory when considering postcolonial narratives. ‘These thinkers [of trauma theory]’, Ward writes, ‘offer a critical vocabulary for, and ways of thinking about, trauma and memory which are highly valuable to a psychological exploration of the postcolonial.’ (p.196)

Novak addresses another problem of the application of trauma theory to postcolonial narratives; she argues that that the ‘discourse of trauma is founded upon an erasure of the voice of the Colonial Other’. (Novak, p.32) She points out, by drawing on readings of Tasso’s Jerusalem Delivered by Freud and Caruth, how trauma theory would place the Other in the place of ‘impossibility’ and the addressee in the place of ‘knowing’. Novak studies this encounter between the West and Africa in Half of a Yellow Sun where Adichie attempts to rework the relationship between speaker and addressee in a traumatic encounter. ‘Adichie … represent[s] the details of trauma in Nigeria,’ Novak writes, ‘alongside a critique of the representation and construction of Africa in the Western imagination.’ (Novak, p.38) Adichie shows how Nigeria’s trauma of the past colonization still influences the present day situation, and at the same time opens up the binary between ‘a knowing Western Subject and an
impossible traumatic Otherness’ in the relationship between Richard and Ugwu. (p.40) As I have pointed out in chapter three, by making Ugwu the author of The Book Adichie shows her point of view on who should write the history of Nigeria. Richard, then, becomes a symbol for the ongoing colonial relationship the West has with Africa and African people as he cannot move beyond his colonial background. As Novak points out: ‘Ugwu becomes the chronicler of trauma as the colonial voice that Richard represents fades into the background, marking the exit of the Western subject from narrative control.’ (p.40)

As Ugwu voices the trauma of the Nigerian past, it becomes clear that the problem is not a colonial Other who cannot speak, but rather a Western addressee who cannot listen. Here Novak draws attention to the Laub’s and Felman’s theory of testimony. They see the reader or listener as a ‘secondary witness’ and Laub claims that ‘[t]he testimony to the trauma thus includes its hearer, who is, so to speak, the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time’. (Laub, Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History, p.57) However, Novak argues that Adichie’s novel shows that the listener never is a ‘blank screen’ and that they ‘bring to the speech act of testimony cultural narratives that shape their interpretation and response’. (Novak, p.39) This is the case of the British in Half of a Yellow Sun who continue to see Africa through their prejudiced gaze as a violent and primal continent. One example of this in the novel is the wrong translation done by Western journalists of ‘MAN MUST WHACK’:

“Ancient tribal hatreds,” the Herald wrote, was the reason for the massacres. Time magazine titled its piece MAN MUST WHACK, an expression printed on a Nigerian lorry, but the writer had taken whack literally and gone on to explain that Nigerians were so naturally prone to violence that they even wrote about the necessity of it on the passenger lorries. Richard sent a terse letter off to Time. In Nigerian Pidgin English, he wrote, whack meant eat. (Half of a Yellow Sun, p.166)

Ugwu addresses the Western reader in the poem which he includes in the epilogue of The Book: ‘You needn’t imagine. There were photos displayed in gloss-filled pages of your Life.’ (Half of a Yellow Sun, p.375) Here Adichie confronts the reader with his Western gaze and shows how some stereotypical images have become equated with African culture. (Novak, p.41) By introducing this poem, Adichie does not allow the trauma of the characters to become identified with the ‘impossible’, and she indicates the constructedness of reality. The trauma can and has to be spoken, and the one who underwent the trauma does not remain a silent Other. It is apparent from the discussion above that simply applying the concepts of trauma would not be productive, one must listen closely to what the text itself is saying.
4.3.2 Formal Elements

Some of the (post) modern elements mentioned above are present in Half of a Yellow Sun, but may not refer directly to a trauma related context. Through examining which elements Adichie uses and how she uses them, the way in which she wants to represent the trauma of the past will become clear. She uses these methods both in the description of the character’s traumas and in the description of the lingering, long-term effects of colonization on Nigerian society. The elements that are relevant here are the use of lacunae and the disrupted chronology. The novel is structured in an non-chronological way; the first part covers the early sixties, the second part jumps ahead to the late sixties, the third part returns to the moment where the first one left off, and the forth one continues the second part on the late sixties. In this way, the second part causes some confusion in the reader’s mind because it deals with events of which he has not yet been informed, most notably Odenigbo’s infidelity.

The structure of the narrative is not influenced by trauma; Adichie uses the flash-backs and flash-forwards to show the constructed nature of the representation of reality. It is in the second part that Olanna and Richard live their traumatic experiences that will have a big impact on their lives. These are represented in their entirety in the narrative, they are not represented in any alternate way than other events that take place. Adichie uses the realist mode to tell her story, and represent the traumatic experiences. Adichie uses realism as “control” in metafictional texts, the norm or the background against which the experimental strategies can foreground themselves’. (Waugh, p.18) The trauma of the characters is not represented formally, but it is thematically. This will be discussed in 4.4.

The novel does not have an open or undecided ending; it ends on a definitive note: the war for Biafra is over, many things have been lost in the process, and everyone is licking their wounds. This may indicate that for Adichie, after writing her novel, she could finally close off that chapter of her life. Or, she would like it to be closed off. Also, there is no repetition of scenes from different point of views; most events are seen by the reader through the eyes of one character. The events follow each other, each seen by another character, and the story advances in this way. This indicates Adichie’s view on how reality should be represented in literature. She makes use of flashbacks, and these can be seen as a form of repetition. These are directly tied to traumatic events that the characters have experienced. These flashbacks are experienced by Olanna and Ugwu. These three also represent the three main characters in the novel. When these flashbacks occur, the past invades the present. But these will also be discussed in more detail in 4.4.
When the elements of the fiction of the third generation are considered, it becomes clear that Adichie is different from this generation. She is part of the second generation, and the most important difference between the two is that the majority of the writers of the third generation are witness only to documents of the past, while Adichie was a witness to her parents and grandparents who were still alive, and were able to tell her stories about the war. Inevitably, she will represent the past in a different way. The use of unreliable narrators and the failure of language are not present in her novel, and this shows that she mediates the past in a different way.

Each character is the narrator of the parts which represent their point of view. That person presents the story as he or she sees it, and there is no omniscient narrator. Adichie describes her characters as follows: ‘I wanted to write characters who are driven by impulses that they may not always be consciously aware of, which I think is true for us human beings.’ (Adichie, ‘The Story Behind the Book’) Not all the thoughts and actions of a character are questioned or discussed. This puts the emphasis again on subjective experience, each character has his or her own point of view. Adichie attempts to represent reality in her novel as how the characters would experience them. These characters tell the story how they see it. The way in which they do this is through their words: each character has his or her own voice and use of language. Adichie uses the realist mode; language does not fail to represent the trauma that these characters live through.

Unlike the third generation which is witness only to documents, Adichie is a witness to live testimony. The failure of language may show a frustration with documents, which can give no real access to a trauma, and often poses more questions than they answer. It also points to the feeling that language is not an adequate medium to express dramatic traumatic experiences, so the writer may resort to other ways of representing it. Adichie represents the trauma in a very clear and detailed manner. An example of this: ‘She stopped when she saw the bodies. Uncle Mbaezu lay facedown in an ungainly twist, legs splays. Something creamy-white oozed through the large gash on the back of his head.’ (Half of a Yellow Sun, p.147) One could say that the description of the traumatic moment is almost too detailed for the reader to bear.

Adichie also incorporates some Igbo phrases in her novel. Often these are accompanied by an English translation, other times it is not. An example of such a use: ‘Yes! Yes! Ojukwu, nye anyi egbe! Give us guns! Iwe di anyi n’obi! There is anger in our hearts!’ (Half of a Yellow Sun, p.171) Even though it is never pointed out exactly, it can be assumed that the English phrases are a translation of the Igbo ones. When the translation is not given, it
seems Adichie wants the reader to not understand. Thus Adichie puts the Western subject in the position of the Other, and the colonial subject is brought to the central and empowered position.

The element of mediation is related to focalization, and the absence of unreliable narrators mentioned above. Each of the four major parts of the novel is subdivided into chapters. Each chapter starts with the name of the character whose point of view that chapter represents. First, these follow each other in a fixed order: Ugwu – Olanna – Richard. These alternate systematically until we reach chapter thirteen which is part of part two: The Late Sixties; this part runs from chapter seven to eighteen. Olanna is featured in chapter thirteen, when according to the order that has been followed Ugwu should have been the next narrator. This is directly after both Olanna and Richard live their traumatic moment, and for the rest of part two the order of the narrators is jumbled. Here the trauma did have an effect on the narrative, it changes the order in which the story is told. The entire part one follows the systematic order, and part three as well. These two parts both represent the early sixties, a period when the war had not yet broken out and no character had lived through any major traumatic moments. Part four picks up where part three left off, and creates a new order of narrators: Olanna – Ugwu – Richard. The use of mediation in this novel also emphasizes the past as something that cannot be grasped immediately, or by one person only. Everyone has their own experience of the past, and their own view on it. This is what the use of different narrators points out.

The next element which is present in many of the third generation’s narratives and important in Adichie’s representation of trauma is the use of myths or fairy tales as intertexts. The old beliefs of the Igbo tribes are present in the novel, and viewed in different ways by various characters. This ‘religion’ is a belief in witchcraft, bad omens and spirits. Ugwu stands by these beliefs, as does Odenigbo’s mother, who is a practitioner of witchcraft. Characters such as Olanna, Odenigbo and Richard, who grew up outside of the small villages, consider these beliefs as myths. Ugwu believes in the existence of spirits, it is something which is present in his everyday life: ‘Ugwu was vaguely frightened the first time he saw him because he had always imagined that only evil spirits had grass-coloured eyes.’ (Half of a Yellow Sun, p.18) Odenigbo’s mother also believes in the power of witchcraft, as the following shows: ‘Please go back and tell those who sent you that you did not find my son. Tell your fellow witches that you did not see him. ... Tell them that nobody’s medicine will work on my son.’ (p.96-97) She said this to Olanna, the woman who Odenigbo is living with. Ugwu believes that Odenigbo’s mother is practising witchcraft to get rid of Olanna. Odenigbo
tries to explain his mother’s behaviour: ‘She’s just a village woman. She’s trying to make her way in a new world with skills that are better suited for the old one.’ (p.100) Ugwu sees her rubbing something on Amala’s back, and this, he believes, leads to Odenigbo cheating on Olanna with Amala. Those who grew up in the city, away from the life in the village do not adhere to these beliefs anymore. Or so they would like to believe. Olanna laughs the superstitions away, and calls the medicine ‘supernatural fetishes’. (p.105)

However, as the Nigeria-Biafra War comes to a close, Olanna’s sister Kainene goes missing when she tries to cross the border is search of goods. Olanna searches for her, and when her search leads to nothing she falls back on the old beliefs and traditions. She consults a ‘dibia’, which is a so-called ‘medicine man’:

She gave him a bottle of whiskey and some money to buy a goat for the oracle. She drove to the River Niger to throw in a copy of Kainene’s photo. She went to Kainene’s house in Orlu and walked around it three times. And she waited for the week that the dibia had stipulated, but Kainene did not come home. (Half of a Yellow Sun, p.433)

When all other hope was lost for her, she turns to her history, the traditions of her forefathers. This seems to mean that it still has some worth for her, and that she is willing to try anything to bring her sister back, the most valuable thing she lost in the war. She says: ‘I do believe in it. I believe in everything. I believe in anything that will bring my sister home.’ (p.433) She is willing to do anything to get her sister back, and she will probably spend the rest of her life looking for her. This shows how tradition may become important again in someone’s life after a traumatic experience.

A last element that is an essential component of the third generation’s narratives is the presence of a quest or a search in the story. The search for Kainene functions as a quest in the final part of the novel, both Olanna en Richard are focussed entirely on filling the emptiness her absence has left. But there is a difference between the two; while Olanna cannot give up hope, Richard slowly comes to the realization he will not see her again. He realizes this when Madu, an old friend of Kainene, punches him after he accuses him of touching her: ‘Darkness descended on him, and when it lifted, he knew that he would never see Kainene again and that his life would always be like a candlelit room; he would see things only in shadow, only in half glimpses.’ (Half of a Yellow Sun, p.430) He will never know what really happened to Kainene; this is what the imagery used here suggests: the world cannot be seen clearly by candlelight, one is not able to discern everything, and a shadow only shows the imprint of something. All of these images refer to a world where one only get a hint or a trace of what is there, and not the complete picture. This may refer to Adichie’s own experience of the
situation of the civil war; she only sees the shadow of the event, never the event itself. The presence of a quest emphasizes the feeling of loss and absence the second and third generation may have concerning the traumatic period.

4.3.3 Thematic Elements

In her novel, Adichie attempts to capture the traumatic aftermath of colonization and the civil war for common people. Each of the narrators of the story, Olanna, Richard and Ugwu, live through a traumatic experience which they struggle with. These experiences are directly linked and caused by the events leading up to and during the Nigeria-Biafra War. Here the theory worked out by the theorists mentioned above will be used; it concerns Freud, Caruth, LaCapra, and Laub. It will become clear that each trauma is personal, and must be treated as such.

I will start this analysis by outlining the origin of the traumatic effects in the different characters, starting with the character Olanna. Her trauma stems from witnessing the dead mutilated bodies of her family members Arize, Aunty Ifeka, and Uncle Mbazi: ‘Aunty Ifeka lay on the veranda. The cuts of her naked body were smaller, dotting her arms and legs like slightly parted red lips.’ (Half of a Yellow Sun, p.147) Around the same time, but in another place, Richard sees how a man, a custom officer called Nnaemeka, gets shot because he is Igbo:

[H]e [Richard] willed something, anything, to happen in the stifling silence and as if in answer to his thoughts, the rifle went off and Nnaemeka’s chest blew open, a splattering red mass, and Richard dropped the note in his hand. (p.153)

Ugwu’s trauma is of a different kind; it occurs at a later point in the war, when he is conscripted. He is haunted by an action of his own doing, he rapes a girl:

She was dry and tense when he entered her. He did not look at her face, or at the man pinning her down, or at anything at all as he moved quickly and felt his own climax ... a self-loathing release. (p.365)

He is not the victim, here he plays the role of the perpetrator. He is nevertheless haunted and traumatized by this experience. What is apparent from the fragments quoted above is that, in the novel the traumatic moment is represented in its entirety and in close detail. The scene as the characters see it, unravelling before their eyes, is recorded in a moment to moment manner of writing; it is almost as if time slows down. To be able to discuss all the traumatic after-effects present in the novel, the analysis will cover Olanna separately from Richard and
Ugwu. Some of the symptoms they experience are the same, but seeing as the origins are so different, it is necessary to treat them separately.

**Olanna**

I will start the analysis with the situation of the character Olanna, firstly because it seems that she has been most deeply affected by the trauma, and secondly because her struggle is the one which is described in the most detail in the novel. To be able to unravel her story and her struggle I have based my analysis on the trauma theory developed by Caruth. Caruth has greatly furthered the study of trauma. I will draw on the introductions she wrote for the book *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (2004) which were greatly influential. The concept of PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) is key to her theory. She describes it as follows:

> [T]here is a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviours stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event. (Caruth, ‘Trauma and Experience: Introduction’, p.4)

As the analysis of Olanna will show, she suffers from this disorder. In the case of PTSD, the root of the problem is related to the fact that ‘the [traumatic] event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it’. (Caruth, p.4) This is the case for Olanna; it is apparent from how the traumatic experience is described in the novel that she does not seem to register it fully at the time. As is mentioned above, the experience is as a film playing before her eyes, while she is merely viewing it and not participating emotionally. After Olanna sees the bodies of her family members she ‘felt a watery queasiness in her bowels before the numbness spread over her and stopped at her feet’. (*Half of a Yellow Sun*, p.147) She does not yet realize what has happened, as shows her reaction to Mohammed dragging her away from the compound: ‘But she could not leave without Arize. Arize was due anytime. Arize needed to be close to a doctor.’ (p.147) She has not yet come to terms with the fact that Arize has been killed.

It seems therefore, that there exists an ‘inherent latency’ within the experience itself. This is a term that Caruth uses, and which she derives from Freud’s use of the term ‘latency’. This term indicates the period after the trauma during which the effects of the experience are not discernible. Caruth adds that what is especially striking is the fact that the experience is not exactly forgotten but rather that there is an inherent latency within the event itself, it is
simply not fully experienced as it occurs. This was pointed out and illustrated in the previous paragraph. It seems that in the novel both the concept of numbing (present in the definition of PTSD) and of inherent latency are being represented quite literally. As Olanna returns home after the traumatic experience, she does not consider the death of her family members. It is only when she arrives at her home that the physical blow of the trauma sets in, and the numbness she felt before paralyses her legs: ‘Her legs were fine when she climbed down from the train. ... But at the front door of Odenigbo’s house, they failed. So did her bladder.’ (*Half of a Yellow Sun*, p.156) This paralysis lasts for several weeks; she is paralysed physically and mentally by the trauma. She also suffers from what is called in the novel ‘Dark Swoops’, which seem to be panic attacks: ‘A thick blanket descended from above and pressed itself over her face, firmly, while she struggled to breathe.’ (p.156) All of these symptoms are delayed; there was a certain division in time between the witnessing of the event and the onset of the symptoms.

Upon arriving home, Olanna collapses at the front door, and that very same night she tells Odenigbo what she saw. It seems that she describes the scene in quite a lot of detail: ‘She described the vaguely familiar clothes on the headless bodies in the yard, the still-twitchy fingers on Uncle Mbaezi’s hand.’ (*Half of a Yellow Sun*, p.156) The concept of testimony and giving testimony after experiencing a traumatic experience is an idea which is central to Laub’s theory on trauma and testimony. Seeing as the traumatic experience is not registered, it is necessary to give testimony of it to somebody else who will listen. As Laub points out: ‘The “not telling” of the story serves as a perpetuation of its tyranny.’ (Laub, ‘Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening’, p.64) This shows Adichie’s emphasis on the importance of narration. If the witness does not relate the story of the traumatic experience to an ‘empathic listener’, one will not be liberated from the grip of the event. As Laub states: ‘The emergence of the narrative which is being listened to – and heard – is, therefore, the process and the place wherein the cognizance, the “knowing” of the event is given birth to.’ (*Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening*, p.57) This may seem a contradiction in Olanna’s case, because she relates her story to Odenigbo.

However, what Laub also clearly stipulates it that the testimony needs an active listener who will actually *hear* the testimony, and who will ‘feel the bewilderment, injury, confusion, dread and conflicts that the trauma victim feels. He has to address all these, if he is to carry out his function as a listener’. (*Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening*, p.58) This is related to LaCapra’s concept of the empathic listener, a concept which I elaborated on in part 4.2.3 on testimony. This is another way in which Adichie points out the
importance of *listening*. It seems this is where Odenigbo falls short; he cannot address Olanna’s trauma head-on: ‘But Odenigbo always said, ‘Shush, *nkem*. You’ll be fine.’ He spoke too softly to her. His voice sounded so silly, so unlike him.’ (*Half of a Yellow Sun*, p.156) Moreover, Laub adds that this may lead to ‘the telling ... itself be[ing] lived as a return of the trauma – a *re-experiencing of the event itself*’. (‘Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening’, p.67) The memory of the traumatic experience needs to be reintegrated into the present, and it seems that for Olanna this has not happened yet. Furthermore, she seems to have trouble with finding the words to articulate her experience: ‘Speaking was a labor. When her parents and Kainene visited, she did not say much; it was Odenigbo who told them what she had seen.’ (*Half of a Yellow Sun*, p.157)

Olanna suffers from the repeated intrusion of the past into the present, in the form of flashbacks and panic attacks. These intrude her life as if they were flashes from the past; they are not omnipresent in the novel but suddenly appear and then disappear again quickly. One instance of a flashback is at a rally, when an image in the present triggers the memory of the past:

> Odenigbo raised his arm as he spoke, and Olanna thought how awkwardly twisted Aunty Ifeka’s arm had looked, as she lay on the ground, how her blood had pooled so thick that it looked like glue, not red but close to black. (*Half of a Yellow Sun*, p.163)

It is clear that this is not an instance of willingly recalling a moment of the past; the image intrudes Olanna’s present. Caruth describes flashbacks as follows: ‘The flashback ... provides a form of recall that survives at the cost of willed memory or the very continuity of conscious thought.’ (Caruth, ‘Recapturing the Past: Introduction’, p.152) It is clear from the extract that the memory interrupts Olanna’s train of thought; it impedes her from being entirely present in the moment. She then tries to regain control and return to the present: ‘Olanna shook her head, to shake away the thoughts, and took Baby from Ugwu’s neck and hugged her close.’ (*Half of a Yellow Sun*, p.163)

What is especially striking about the flashback is how detailed it is; Caruth comments on this by observing that ‘the literal registration of an event – the capacity to continually, in the flashback, reproduce it in exact detail – appears to be connected ... precisely with the way it *escapes* full consciousness as it occurs’. (‘Recapturing the Past, p.152-153) In this statement, there seems to be a paradox: the memory is absent and at the same time too present. It is precisely the unchanged nature of the memory which is important here; the experience ‘cannot become, as Janet calls it, a “narrative memory” that is integrated into a completed story of the past’, and thus cannot be changed. (‘Recapturing the Past, p. 153)
term by Janet is very interesting here, because it ties in with White’s idea of how history needs to be written before it can be digested. Olanna lives with these flashbacks and intrusions of the past for a long time, as shows the following comment she makes: ‘It was often difficult to visualize anything concrete that was not dulled by memories of Arize and Aunty Ifeka and Uncle Mbazi, that did not feel like life being lived on suspended time.’ (*Half of a Yellow Sun*, p.185) This is again an example of how the trauma can be overly present and absent at the same time. Furthermore, Caruth notes that being possessed by an event that cannot be integrated into a person’s knowledge of the past ‘often produces a deep uncertainty as to its very truth’. (*Trauma and Experience*, p.6) Olanna experiences this feeling of uncertainty: ‘And she wondered if she was mistaken, if she had perhaps imagined the bodies lying in the dust.’ (*Half of a Yellow Sun*, p.193)

It is perhaps in her testimony to Ugwu that Olanna manages to work through some of traumatic effects of her experience. He clearly engages more with her testimony, and here she feels for the first time as if she is truly listened to, as shows her surprise as Ugwu asks a question about her experience: ‘How was it plaited?’ Ugwu asked. Olanna was surprised, at first, by the question and then she realized that she clearly remembered how it was plaited.’ (*Half of a Yellow Sun*, p.409) The fact that she is surprised by the question shows that she is not used to people showing genuine interest in the story of that day. Her surprise of, on the other hand, her detailed memory shows that she was never aware of how the memory presented itself to her. This seems to be the first time she actively and consciously engages with her memories of that day, and even though it is not the memory of the experience of witnessing the bodies themselves, it is still part of the traumatic experiences of that day. This is a huge step towards ‘working through’, a term used by LaCapra. It indicates the process in which ‘the person tries to gain critical distance on a problem and to distinguish between past, present, and future’. (*Writing History*, p. 143) Adichie uses this to show how narration may have a therapeutic effect, as the writing of her novel may have had for her. She also emphasizes the importance of the *writing* of a narrative as an integral part of articulating it. Olanna is certainly on her way to managing some critical distance between her and the event, as she can reflect on the way in which she remembers it. As she is describing the scene in the train, Olanna comes to a realization:

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. (*Half of a Yellow Sun*, p.410)
While in the quote there is a concern for the political and social importance of Ugwu’s book, there is also the realization of Olanna that her story may be worth telling. The ‘larger purpose’ she speaks of may be of a social category but it may also be a deep personal realization that telling her story might set her free. Here Adichie again emphasizes the vital importance of narration, on a personal and a communal plane.

Richard and Ugwu

Richard’s trauma is of a different sort than Olanna’s. He witnesses how a custom officer called Nnaemeka gets shot, simply because he is Igbo. After this the soldiers killed dozens more Igbo people at the airport. Richard spent a few minutes talking to this man before he was killed, and witnessing his violent death from so close-by shocks Richard to his core. His process of working through the trauma takes on a different form from Olanna’s; this should come as no surprise as each trauma is fundamentally different for each person. The experience is again presented as if a film plays before his eyes, he cannot act; he is frozen: ‘One of the soldiers walked up close and shot him and then aimed at the bottles of liquor lined up behind and shot those. The room smelt of whisky and Campari and gin.’ (Half of a Yellow Sun, p.153) Richard is deeply shocked by this, and his body seems to protest to the experience: ‘He almost missed his flight because, as the other passengers walked shakily to the plane, he stood aside, vomiting. (p.153)

The way in which Richard experiences the traumatic aftermath is described in the following quote:

He had often wished that he would lose his mind, or that his memory would suppress itself, but instead everything took on a terrible transparence and he had only to close his eyes to see the freshly dead bodies on the floor of the airport and to recall the pitch of the screams. His mind remained lucid. (p.165) ‘

It would seem that Richard is able to access the memory, seeing as he does not suffer from sudden and unwilled intrusions of the past. However, what frightens him the most is exactly the absence of these traumatic memories. He feels as if he should be more affected by what had happened: ‘‘I’m going on. Life is the same,’’ he told Kainene. ‘‘I should be reacting; things should be different.’’ (p.167) This relates to Caruth notion of inherent latency of the traumatic event; Richard simply has not registered the moment completely or assimilated the memory into the narrative of the past. Therefore he feels he has not reacted emotionally in an adequate way. Caruth points out this seemingly paradoxical situation: ‘‘[I]n trauma the greatest
confrontation with reality may also occur as an absolute numbing to it, that immediacy ... may take the form of belatedness.’ (‘Trauma and Experience’, p.6) Richard can, however, recall the memory with a surprising amount of detail. As is pointed out in 4.4.1, this is related to the fact that the memory escapes normal assimilation into the memory bank of the person involved.

Richard feels the need to articulate his trauma in his writing; as a writer he seems to be aware of the cathartic effect it can have. However, as he attempts to do this, he feels as if he cannot: ‘The echo of unreality weighed each word down; he clearly remembered what had happened at that airport, but to write about it he would have to reimage it, and he was not sure if he could.’ (Half of a Yellow Sun, p.168) The central feeling present in the quote is helplessness; Richard is aware that he has the memory, he cannot, however, access it actively. Writing his experience down is his kind of testimony, but it seems that he is not yet ready to work through it. Here Adichie affirms the vital importance of narration. As the novel ends, it appears that Richard has not yet fully addressed his traumas of the civil war seeing as his mind is fully occupied with finding Kainene. Her disappearance is a trauma which he probably will never fully recover from, as the last quote from him in the novel shows: ‘[H]e knew he would never see Kainene again and that his life would always be like a candlelit room; he would see things only in shadow, only in half glimpses.’ (p.430)

In Ugwu’s case, it is important to note from the beginning of the analysis that he is in a dual situation: he finds himself in what is called by Primo Levi 'the grey zone'. In this zone, the distinction between victim and perpetrator is blurred, and a person can be both of these at the same time. This idea stems from Levi’s own experiences in Auschwitz during the Holocaust, where some inmates would find themselves in this split state of mind. Ugwu can be seen as the victim of violence, seeing as he is conscripted, and is forced to fight in combat. However, he is also a perpetrator of violence when he rapes an innocent girl. When Ugwu is recovering from his wounds in Nsukka, he is haunted by his memories of the war and of the bar girl: ‘He could not remember her features, but the look in her eyes stayed with him, as did the tense, dryness between her legs, the way he had done what he had not wanted to do.’ (p.397) This is again a case of hypermnnesia and amnesia: the memory is absent and too present at the same time.

The way in which he is able to deal with both of these experiences is by dissociating himself from the event as it happens. This ties up with Caruth’s concept of inherent latency of a traumatic experience; the event is not registered at the moment when it occurs, it will return later when there is no longer any physical danger for the person involved. The dissociation is
clear from how the battle scenes are described: ‘Ugwu’s fear sometimes overwhelmed him, froze him. He unwrapped his mind from his body, separated the two, while he lay in the trench. ... The ka-ka-ka of shooting, the cries of men, the smell of death ...were distant.’ (Half of a Yellow Sun, p.365) However afterwards, when he is far away from the immediate danger of the battle field in the camp, the memories come rushing back in: ‘But back at the camp his memory became clear; he remembered the man who placed both hands on his blown-open belly as though to hold his intestines in.’ (p.365) The same mechanism seems to be put into action at the bar, when Ugwu rapes the girl. He seems to be emotionally absent from the scene: ‘He did not look at her face, or at the man pinning her down, or at anything at all as he moved quickly and felt his own climax, the rush of fluids to the tips of himself: a self-loathing release.’ (p.365) It is quite shocking for the reader that this character would do such a thing, and is probably shocking to Ugwu as well. He is filled with self-loathing from the moment the experience is over.

As has been discussed in chapter three, writing is an act of atonement for Ugwu. It is a way for him to begin to ‘digest’ the past, and live in the present. As Olanna and Richard, Ugwu also has trouble finding the right words to write about the horrors of war: ‘He would never be able to depict the very bleakness of bombing hungry people. But he tried, and the more he wrote the less he dreamed.’ (Half of a Yellow Sun, p.398) By introducing these three cases (Olanna, Richard and Ugwu) Adichie makes a point about the importance of narration and writing for the digestion of the personal and communal past. In accordance with Laub’s ideas, Adichie seems to feel as if narration has the capacity to bring about a therapeutic effect in the speaker or writer. On the one hand, this narration is represented as a very solitary and personal project; this is exemplified in Richard. On the other hand it is also represented as an effort with a benefit for the entire community, as Ugwu’s book might have. The interpersonal aspect is also very important; Ugwu helps Olanna to articulate her story.
5. CONCLUSION

Clearly history, literature and trauma theory intersect in many different ways in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, and most importantly in the depiction of the central characters. Adichie attempts to represent the daily reality of these characters, which she characterizes as multi-interpretable from multiple perspectives. In doing so, the novel is in line with Ankersmit’s ideas on the nature of reality. Thus, it seems only natural that Adichie should have these different techniques intersect, seeing as to approach reality from only one perspective would be to undermine Ankersmit’s concept of it. Adichie is entirely conscious of the way in which she uses these narrative techniques, as she includes an explanatory note at the end of her novel about the fictional nature of it. This shows that she is aware of the intermediary status of the historical novel between fact and fiction.

The three narrators in the novel are the central elements. It is through them that Adichie is able to blur the boundaries between history, literature and trauma. Adichie applies the historical events to the characters, but the historical dimension never takes over the personal one. The emotional truth is what constitutes the core of the story, and what is highlighted the most throughout the novel. The characters live through the events of the Nigeria-Biafra War, but what takes precedence is how it felt to be there, and how it still feels. Adichie makes the literary (or personal) and traumatic dimension intersect with the historical one to make the historical and political history felt.

In essence, the novel is Adichie’s discourse about the past, and it shows her relationship to that past. As White points out, we can only access history through language, and its discourse must be written before it can be digested. Here history, literature and trauma theory converge, seeing as Adiche uses a literary work to mediate her own relation to a traumatic past. The novel thus also serves a therapeutic function on a higher level than the narration: it helps Adichie deal with the trauma she inherited from her parents. However, the novel also has a memorial function for Adichie. The novel seems to oscillate between laying the ghosts of the past to rest and summoning them. (Durrant, p.9) Perhaps this paradox is Adichie’s way of coming to terms with the past. As is illustrated in the novel, working through a trauma is a highly personal matter.

According to White, the historian and the fiction writer come together when the historian has to transform his study into a written form. Adichie engages with this insight by introducing snippets of The Book in the novel. Here she lays bare the core of her own project, and writes about it metafictionally. In Ugwu and his book, the three narrative techniques
again intersect. The Book is a mixture of history and literature; Ugwu, as Adichie, uses the political to make the personal felt. Also, by introducing the different points of view on history, he indicates that the reality of the past should be seen from multiple perspectives and as multi-interpretable. Ugwu ‘emplots’ the historical events in a chronological and causal story. Furthermore, The Book serves as an act of atonement for Ugwu; thus it also has a connection to his trauma of the war and the rape. In this way Adichie shows that she is aware of her own strategies as a writer of historical fiction, and of how history and memory are constructed entities.

By making Ugwu the author of The Book and describing his rise to the role of author Adichie puts emphasis on the human intervention in both the process of writing literature and constructing history. Kellner also points out the dimension of human intervention in the writing of stories about history. These stories can be of critical importance for an entire culture because, as White points out, before history can be digested, it needs to be written first. This is where trauma theory ties in to the writing of history; the narration of the trauma is a vital component of overcoming it.

Beside the trauma of the past, Adichie is also concerned with the traumatic after-effects of the period of British colonization that are still present in Nigerian society today. By making Ugwu the author of The Book, instead of Richard, Adichie not only validates her own role as a writer but also speaks out strongly about who has the authoritative voice to represent the past of Africa. Adichie writes in a postcolonial context, and as in the term postmemory, the ‘post’ seems to denote a relationship of connectedness, rather than of a period separated from the one that came before. Her novel is an attempt to understand the ongoing consequences of the colonial era.

Clearly the act of narrating or telling is central to the novel and to the intersection of the three narrative strategies. Adichie grew up dominated by the narratives of her family’s traumas of the Nigeria-Biafra War, and she then writes her own narrative about that traumatic past. Again the three narrative techniques intersect. Hirsch uses the term ‘postmemory’ to refer to Adichie’s relationship to the past of her parents. The concept of testimony is of major importance in this relation. Adichie testifies to her own trauma by writing her novel, and she incorporates the importance of testimony in the novel by introducing the individual traumas of the characters. Narrating a traumatic experience is the one way in which a subject can work through the trauma. Ugwu’s book, Olanna’s testimony to Ugwu and Richard’s inability to write about his trauma are all examples of the importance of the articulation of certain traumatic experiences. However, even though trauma theory can be of great use to further
understand the postcolonial context, it is still important to take care when one applies this theory.

After the trauma theory had been applied to the individual cases of the central characters, it has become clear that these might lead to some interesting insights into the workings of trauma, and the way in which trauma is depicted in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Adichie emphasizes the importance of articulating a trauma, and underlines the use of writing a narrative as an integral part of articulating it. Furthermore, the listener is an integral part of the act of testifying. Ugwu shows himself to be an attentive listener to Olanna, and in the novel the shortcomings of the Western subject, who fails to listen to the voice of the postcolonial subject, are illustrated. In her novel, Adichie validates the use of narration and of listening, and shows how literature finds itself at the crossroads of many different disciplines.
6. BIBLIOGRAPHY

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