

**Traumatic Realism and the retrieval of Historical Value in Chimamanda  
Ngozi Adichie's postcolonial text *Half of a Yellow Sun***

**Mustapha Kharoua**  
University of Eastern Finland, Finland

**Abstract**

*As a searing narrative which grapples with the trauma of the past, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) has managed to garner quite considerable critical acclaim. Acknowledging the nuances of documenting the violence inflicted upon the Igbo people in Nigeria in the 1967-1970 war, this postcolonial text convincingly rethinks the narrative of trauma beyond the event-based paradigm. Out of responsibility, its pressing demands for justice against the enduring effects of colonialism typify postcolonial trauma theory's attempt at probing into the everyday suffering of African subjects. Reading Adichie's text through Michael Rothberg's notion "traumatic realism", this article examines the novel's attempt to both document the past and to implicate the Western reader. To resist objectification, the novel sets out to redirect the attention of the reader toward the "pogroms" committed on racial grounds. The main focus will be on Ugwu's re-writing the enduring effects of colonial violence in post-generational terms and of blurring the boundaries between the extreme and the everyday.*

**Keywords: trauma-realism-documentation-the public-commodification**

Recent literary focus on the exploration of trauma in many non-European contexts has been driven by the moral prerogative to bring the readers' attention to the traumatic after-effects of colonial violence. By virtue of necessarily engaging a multi-disciplinary approach to come to terms with the painful past, questions of the post-traumatic effects upon postcolonial writings' will to truth are brought to bear mainly on the psychological, historical and ethical issues of representation. The latest critical contributions such as Stef Craps's and Gert Buelens's collection of essays *Postcolonial Trauma Novels* (2008), Craps's *Postcolonial Witnessing* (2013), and the collection of essays *The Future of Trauma Theory* (Buelens, Durrant and Eaglestone 2014), to mention but these, have freshly addressed the need to decolonize trauma studies and give colonial violence its "traumatic due". Against the dominance of cultural trauma studies, the above contributions set out to unmoor the studies of trauma from their Eurocentric harbors. Pacing Cathy Caruth's theorization about the ethical purchase of cross-cultural witnessing, the debate over literary witnessing through combining the "textualist" paradigms with the historicist and culturalist approaches can translate, in Craps's and Buelens's views, into new ways of cross-cultural solidarity (Craps and Buelens 2008).

This article thus follows this line of thought. It argues that Adichie's novel can most fruitfully be read from an ethical viewpoint if Rothberg's concept traumatic realism is implemented. Rothberg's concept holds pertinence as it opens new avenues into the colonial underpinnings through experimental textual practice. His are the rare trauma studies' critical works that have pinpointed literary exegesis focused on the colonial violence, thereby insisting on the need to remap it upon the genocides that have marred European history (Rothberg 2000; 2006). Reading the novel by virtue of its reliance on the realist and constructionist modes of reference to the past also answers Robert Eaglestone's drawing attention to the ethical purchase of revisiting African texts through the lens of such a notion as "traumatic realism", one among myriad approaches to the past that should not fall by the wayside in postcolonial trauma analyses (Eaglestone 2008, 74). I will thus first analyze Adichie's text in the light of Rothberg's notion in order to argue how, in fusing the real and anti-real in her narrative structure, her text both recognizes the inhibiting act of narrating trauma and the persistence underlying its search for justice in the public sphere. So, in the case of disseminating knowledge about the events that blighted her community, Adichie's traumatic realism "is primarily interested not in the question of reference and knowledge of the past, but rather in the question of the proper ethical stance to take in relation to the past" (Rothberg 2000, 14). Her ability to delve into the human complexity of the war aims to restore the humanity of African subjectivity and lay bare the ongoing existence of tribalism as a holdover of colonialism. I thus seek to point to her stance as an implicated bystander who is not directly affected by the events (Rothberg 2000, 22) which compel her to implicate more subjects. The author brings to the public attention the colonial ramifications of the racism that fuelled the violence committed against the Igbo people. The second part of this article will examine how Adichie attempts to restore historical value to her people's cause. I will argue that she is not only trying to redirect the focus of the Western reader toward the African trauma, but also she is making a convincing case against the frameworks that silence the African child through dehumanizing and objectifying means.

## **Mixing the Everyday and the Extreme**

Intrinsic to trauma narratives that are identity-related, the novel's narrative proper is much less focused on the soldiers' fighting than on the war's impact on the domestic lives of ordinary people who are isolated, seeking to retrieve the humanity of the victims and pinpointing the possibility that trauma can be inherited from family and culture at large (Rothberg 2000, 186). Further confirming that any ordinary people's very safe haven can be invaded by traumatizing events, the centrality of the human aspect draws the reader's attention to the mixing of the everyday and the extreme. The coexistence of these antinomies serves to revise the event-based trauma paradigm which insists on the direct presence of the victim. The depiction of the daily life of the victims experiencing, either directly or indirectly, racist attitudes reveals that the definition of direct witnessing of the brutalities like war or genocide "needs to be expanded [...] as there are many other experiences than those involving "actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self and other" that can result in post-traumatic symptoms' (Craps 2013, 25-26). The latent after-effects of the war's events which also weigh on the rendition of the novel's narrative show that their absence "signals their overwhelming impact" (Rothberg 2000, 1).

The novel's narrative voice seeps through the consciousness of the three main characters: Olanna, a teacher at Nsukka University before the war started; Ugwu, her husband's houseboy and Richard, the British lover of Kainene, Olanna's twin sister. Through these characters, the novel makes a strong political statement by underlying the necessary alliances that create a public which combines gender, class and race in African trauma literatures. The work then foregrounds how each of these characters' telling is challenged by the traumatic encounters and the daily fears in the wartime (Novak 2008, 33). The everydayness of traumatic symptoms is therefore instructive given that

By representing a site of extreme violence as a borderland of extremity and everydayness, traumatic realism attempts to produce the traumatic event as an object of knowledge and to program and transform its readers so that they are forced to acknowledge their relationship to posttraumatic culture. (Rothberg 2000, 109)

Devoting attention to the post-traumatic effects of colonialism in literary texts seems as such to be more and more demanding for African writers. In the globalized world today where traumatic events are mushrooming, the issue of an ethical stance toward the painful past has become more pressing as painful histories keep implicating the writers to bring the post-traumatic effects of colonialism to the critical attention of their readers. This is by no means an easy task as traumatic events are both tenuous and elusive to memory. Yet, though trauma constitutes a recognizably daunting undertaking, the textualist paradigms can afford a unique access to history. In Caruth's view, what makes the hermeneutics of memory a quintessential approach is that as it implicates others to bear ethical witness 'the language of trauma, and the silence of its mute repetition of suffering, profoundly and imperatively demand' a "new mode of reading and of listening" (Caruth 1996, 9).

To be afforded justice in the public sphere is thus of utmost consideration in traumatic contexts as the victim seeks to rescue the event from silencing isolation and attempts to mobilize the bystanders to take an ethical stance toward the event. Judith Herman points out that, in response to the silencing oppression of the perpetrator to block from view the victim's claims, the latter brings the inflicted injustices to public attention in order to rescue it from the margins of individual claims to those of the culture at large. Correspondingly,

To hold traumatic reality in consciousness requires a social context that affirms and protects the victim and that joins victim and witness in a common alliance. For the individual victim, this social context is created by relationships with friends, lovers, and family. For the larger society, the social context is created by political movements that give voice to the disempowered. (Herman 1999, 8)

The diverse forms of media in existence are therefore responsible for ensuring or denying the victims their right to narrate. In this sense, postcolonial literature restores justice through bringing the silencing dynamics to the attention of the public sphere. Hindrance to "the right to write" and its claim to justice hinges, nonetheless, not merely on losing the narrative of the event in its literality; rather, recording the past assumes its cogency from the writers' ability to unsettle the mechanisms of silence through dismantling the meaning making processes of hegemony that discredit the legitimacy of the victim's claims. I thereby argue that Adichie's account of the history of the past is not a promise of a complete recovery from the after-effects of colonial violence. The critical purchase of accounting for the nuances that mark her depiction of the past events underlies her acknowledgement of the challenges still confronted by her community's cause to be recognized (postscript 2) as the post-traumatic and the post-colonial are critically intertwined. As David Lloyd ascertains in this respect, the intricate use of power by hegemony tends to "perpetually reproduce the symptoms of traumatization" as it constantly "occludes from public space the social logics within which the victim can make sense" (Lloyd 2008, 214-215). Hence, in the vein of other African traumas, what blocks the Igbo people's cause from view and shows them as undeserving of empathy is their losing the meaning of being human as nationalism continues to perpetuate the same de-humanizing discourse of tribalism.

For reasons that ethically raise the dilemma of the complexity of trauma narratives, the event can never be represented in oversimplified forms and, as such, solicits the presence of complex processes which have a bearing upon epistemology, ethics and politics. As will be explained further, the novel's traumatic realism attempts to respond to these demands as it acknowledges the irretrievability of history in its literality. As Rothberg concurs,

In the representation of a historical event [...] a text's "realist" component seeks strategies for referring and documenting the world; its "modernist" side questions its ability to document history transparently; and its "postmodern" moment responds to the economic and political conditions of its emergence and public circulation. (Rothberg 2000, 9)

This quote thus further conveys the persistence of a traumatic event to be documented and brought to the public attention in spite of its inaccessibility and resistance to being integrated

into the narrative. The daunting process of recounting violence thereby feeds the need to foster new ways of reading and listening given that understanding comes to replace history when “texts that bear witness to traumatic histories can grant us a paradoxical mode of access to extreme events [as] textual ‘undecidability’ or ‘unreadability’ comes to reflect the inaccessibility of trauma” (Craps 2013, 2).

The novel’s ability to garner huge critical interest goes back to the fact that it is self-reflexive as it employs the *mise-en-abyme* technique through which the text “reflects upon the moment of writing history” (Ngwira 2012, 43). The anti-linearity in *HYS* reflects the very process of being confronted with the challenge of integrating the “real” events of the past into the narrative flow. The inset, fragmented text written by an unannounced author to supplement the storyline, however, constitutes the parallel thread which insists on restoring historical justice to the past. Rather than contributing to the flow of the plotline, “The Book: The World Was Silent When We Died” (hereafter referred to as “The Book”) reflects the return of the repressed in trauma and unexpectedly punctuates the narrative. The novel’s traumatic realism “does not ignore the demand to confront the unfound nature of writing, but it nevertheless attempts to develop new forms of ‘documentary’ and ‘referential’ discourse out of that very traumatic void” (Rothberg 2000, 96).

In tandem with its resistance to injustice, “The Book” refers to the events of the war by situating it against a backdrop of British-inspired silence and the unavoidably stretching post-traumatic effects of colonial violence into post-independence Nigeria. Adichie’s call for justice thus translates into fusing the realist and constructionist paradigms. In the novel’s postscript, she acknowledges the moral difficulty she confronted in the course of turning into narrative the overwhelming amount of depressing sources she had culled from photos, books and witnesses. She thus opts for imbuing the traumatizing events with meaning and, at times, ends up leaving out some details she thinks would betray the human complexity of the experiences (Postscript, 3).

The novel’s focus on history aims to revitalize the documentary function of writing as it evokes the memories of the events that befell the Igbo people. It features the way the injustices committed in all facets of life pushed the Igbo military officers to lead a coup in 1966, which was followed by the atrocious reprisal against the minority group on racial grounds. The nation was gripped by mounting racial violence as massacres were committed to claim the lives of tens of thousands in the North. By virtue of its function as a historical reference to the massacres, “The Book” highlights the post-independence disillusionment under the guise of national unity. As Ugwu here refers to himself in the third person

He gestures to complex problems facing the new country but focuses on the 1966 massacres. The ostensible reasons—revenge for the ‘Igbo coup’, protest against a unitary decree that would make Northerners lose out in the civil service—did not matter. What mattered was that the massacres frightened and united the Igbo. What mattered was that the massacres made fervent Biafrans of former Nigerians. (*HYS* 2006, 205)

Besides unraveling the pretended unity that encapsulates the brutality of the massacres, the quote underscores the rationalization of the violence through silencing the everyday injustices

faced by the Igbo people. It conveys that the documentation of history needs to be critical in order to counteract the after-effects of trauma through dismantling the sense making processes of the silencing hegemonic discourse. In order to question the murky justifications of the alleged national unity that purports to better the future of the citizens, the quote satirizes the oversimplifications that trivialize the victims' claims. Within a context in which the Nigerian leaders' over-ambitiousness led them to "aping" the British and "taking over the superior attitudes" long denied to them, the Igbo were to undergo underprivileged status in all facets of life on racial grounds (HYS 2006, 205).

The quote thus captures the complexity of the historical moment as it sets out to confirm that nationalism perpetuates the same tenuous after-effects of racism that lie at the backdrop of colonial discourse. If the postcolonial historian wants to make "other sense of the event", s/he needs to resist the ongoing dynamics of silence that hamper testimony as "the frequent literal numbing of sense in the trauma victim corresponds to this denial of the means of making sense of the traumatizing event outside the terms that constitute the common sense of hegemony" (Lloyd 2008, 215).

Thus, what seemed to perpetuate the enduring after-effects of colonial violence was that the end of colonialism in Nigeria in 1960 did not seem to bear the fruit of liberating the individual and national identity from the after-effects of colonialism and oppression. The Igbo were able to outperform the other ethnic groups: the Hausa-Fulani, the Yoruba and hundreds of other minorities. They reached high literacy rate and important positions, which made the schools of the north deny the Igbo children learning access (HYS, 38). Business corporations and government institutions too became a fertile environment for launching an ethnic war. This suddenly emerging hatred solicits awareness of its colonial implications as it is the product of "the informal divide-and-rule policies of the British colonial exercise" (HYS, 166).

The historical document therefore peers into the colonial underpinnings that lie behind imposed silence. After the coup that refused such daily experienced injustices, there were violent riots which were suspiciously government-organized; a stream of more than one million refugees left their homes for the eastern region. Feeling insecure, the Igbo declared secession on 30 May 1967 to create the separatist state of Biafra (Heerten and Moses 2014, 173). By the help of rationalized international indifference toward the Igbo cause, a catastrophic war raged between 1967 and 1970. Over a million people were displaced and starved to death out of the deliberate policy of blockade of the Nigerian government which isolated the Igbo in all facets of life (Heerten and Moses 2014, 182). What further stranded the victims and brought the perpetrator and bystander into common alliance was that the massacres and the world's silence were supported and inspired by the British government's neocolonial interests. The writer of "The Book" thus aims to cover a wider ground in order to situate the massacres within a broader historical context of imposed silence,

He writes about the world that remained silent while Biafrans died. He argues that Britain inspired this silence. The arms and advice that Britain gave Nigeria shaped other countries. In the United States, Biafra was 'under Britain's sphere of interest'. In Canada, the prime minister quipped, 'Where is Biafra?' The Soviet Union sent

technicians and planes to Nigeria [...] And many African countries feared that an independent Biafra would trigger other secessions and so supported Nigeria. (HYS, 258)

The Igbo people's cause was thus to be shrouded in silence as the international community allowed the Nigerian government to isolate its claims. Such a crisis can be defined as inducing traumatic effects as it is generally confirmed in theory that the victims of trauma are silenced and thus isolated by perpetrators who try in every way possible to discredit their accounts or make them invisible (Herman 1997, 8). In undertaking to historicize the painful past by prying open the secluded world hindering testimony, the above quote seeks to lay bare the brutal and traumatizing effects of the world's silence. The need to circulate Ugwu's document within a fraught context is therefore an attempt at restoring the "real" that particularly unsettles the hegemonic orthodoxy of the discourse of tribalism. As Ugwu addresses himself as the "he" who writes the book and "discusses", in an interactive fashion to a potential addressee, the favoring of the North over the South given its pleasantly dry weather; moreover, in contrast to the north,

The humid South [...] was full of mosquitoes and animists and disparate tribes. The Yoruba were the largest in the Southwest. In the Southeast, the Igbo lived in small republican communities. They were non-docile and worryingly ambitious. Since they did not have the good sense to have kings, the British created 'warrant chiefs' because indirect rule cost the Crown less. Missionaries were allowed in to tame the pagans, and the Christianity and education they brought flourished. In 1914, the government general joined the North and the South, and his wife picked a name. Nigeria was born. (HYS, 115)

Ugwu thus undertakes the task of questioning the authority of such a discourse as the novel aims to bring the ramifications of colonial after-effects to the forefront by using "The Book" which, by situating itself in the very moment of its writing, spatio-temporally guides the reader to the colonial times and the "divide-and-rule" policy's far-reaching violence. By framing Ugwu's document within the main flow of the narrative, the novel "reflects upon its own making by staging the writing process of 'The Book: The World Was Silent When We Died'" (Ngwira, 47). As an extra witness exemplifying the use of *mise-en-abyme*, "The Book" is both essential to place the events of the narrative in their context and is thrust into different abyssal spaces of the novel. In this sense it is able to yield "extratextual" knowledge of the outside world by "entering into more complex structures that may serve to model or map that world cognitively" (McHale 2012, 178). In the different references to the world events communicated to an addressee through the use of phrases such as "he argues", "he writes", "he recounts", "he gestures", the presence of a debate could be sensed through building a crucible for public investigation, thereby contextualizing the events surrounding the war. In fact, Ugwu's document spans various histories of violence and the African one to investigate the Igbo cause which should be mapped upon other histories. These investigations mainly include: the Holocaust and Rwandan violence (82), the violence that raged after the Igbo coup (205), independence in its relation to the Second World War and the world's silence toward their cause (258). Ugwu's fashion of rendering the document recasts the Igbo history within the dynamics that transcend the event geographically and, as such, by

addressing an implied audience, Biafra is not isolated historically as the document's reference is "not so much to a place as to an event or events" (Rothberg 2000, 28).

### **A Western-facing African account**

This title is borrowed from Eaglestone who criticizes the fashion in which the representation of the depressing stories from Africa have pushed the African writers to address the western audience directly (Eaglestone 2008). The ethical imperative to redirect the Western reader's attention toward African suffering remains ironically paramount for African writers. It is to be noted that the ongoing fascination with the African trauma, and for my purposes here that of children, warrants a rewriting of the colonial discourse on a post-generational basis as there lies the tendency to commodify the depressing images of suffering from the black continent. Many researchers in fact have drawn attention to the Americanization of Holocaust studies which have turned into "a moral touchstone" and led to glossing over atrocities experienced in non-European contexts (Craps and Rothberg 2011, 517-518). But the risk that Rothberg saliently points to is the mass-marketing of genocide in the process of popularization and Americanization, thereby laying focus on the kind of media manipulation not only able to relativize the event but also dissolve it in a flow of visually representational networks (Rothberg 2000, 181). Similarly, despite the fact that of late the Western conscience has had to redirect its focus toward the various crises blighting the continent, there is a pressing need to explore the reasons why Africans writing in English still lament the scant emphasis on their continent's traumas. One element is the readers' uncanny fascination with trauma as "it may be that revealing a terror is inextricably interwoven with some sort of voyeurism, and all forms of representation are polyvalent (Eaglestone 2008, 76). In further investigating the question of distance and its attendant isolation, need arises to probe into the commodification of African traumas under the same terms. The coming pages will thus elucidate Ugwu's writing as a process of rescuing the African child's subjectivity. Focus will be on how he not only redirects the Western reader's attention toward African traumas, but also he dismantles the frameworks that lead to commodifying the depressing stories of the African child's suffering. It will prove that "traumatic realism is not turned only toward the past and its tendency to reappear in haunting repetition. By virtue of its performative address to a posttraumatic context" the novel's "writing possesses a future orientation" (Rothberg 2000, 140).

Issues of the post-traumatic effects of colonial misrepresentations thus convey the dangers of having one's suffering misappropriated to fit the mainstream media's self-serving scenarios. Olanna's burning of the Biafran money after the war begs the debate over the democratization of the post-conflict conditions of telling as this decision is inspired by a refusal to "place memory on things that strangers could barge in and take away" because "memory is inside" her (*HYS*, 432). Symbolic as it may be, Olanna's statement is reminiscent of the recirculation of the Biafran Pound by the MASSOB (The Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra) in 2006, which implies an anchoring of value to narrative in post-generational terms. It is meant to tinker with the legitimacy of the colonial legacy through economic means invested with narrative value as a redemptive act.



Based on the historical references to the war in Nigeria, the Biafran pound may be cast as a kind of documentation supplying the epistemology that contests colonial dependency in that it is a “physical memorial to the short-lived existence of Biafra itself: not only that, but for those who lived through the experience, and for ethnonationalist-minded south easterners more generally, it is a poignant memorial to the personal and independent wealth of an entire region” (Owen 2009, 586). In similar vein, lest the symbolic value of the currency be compromised in the hands of others who might appropriate it, Olanna does not want the attempts to remember the past to go awry. Her passing on the painful story of the past to Ugwu typifies her belief in the ability of the younger generation’s education to resist the bequest of colonialism through possessing “the tools to understand exploitation” (*HYS*, 11). Olanna’s statement about Biafran money thus lays bare the exploitative manoeuvring of embedded effects of fascination by conditions of suffering to an audience constantly reminded of the state of stagnation blighting the African Other.

The exploration of trans-generational witnessing, for that matter, brings forth the libidinal investment of Western representations in trauma narratives of African childhood. Exemplifying the post-traumatic effects of telling about the gross events in the novel, Olanna is able to narrate the story of the little Igbo girl’s severed head only belatedly. She comes face to face with the event when the Igbo people have escaped the atrocities committed in the North. The inability to tell the story of the girl denotes the imperative to undertake the moral and individual disposition to be a responsible witness. Her incident on the train when she sees the head of a little girl is a telling instance of the fraught issue of vicarious victimization and the need to attune for her guilt as a bystander who needs to respond to the demands of extremity. Opening the calabash, the girl’s mother shows Olanna “the little girl’s head with the ashy-grey skin and the plaited hair and rolled-back eyes and open mouth” (*HYS*, 149). The fact that the mother asks her with shocking ordinariness to “look” at the head which she says she plaited every day blasts open the boundaries between the extremity and the ordinary the everyday and implicates anybody meant to “look” at the “spectacular” body by insinuating that at the age of the catastrophe traumatic events can be far-reaching.

Not having been directly affected by an occurrence she could not prevent, Olanna belatedly identifies with the victim and narrates the event to an African teenager, a promising writer. Handing down the story in fact challenges the objectification of the African child and shifts her/his passive and victimizing stance into that of promising subjectivity made possible. The horrible sight of the body is then not meant to evoke sympathy; rather, it is a dynamic image geared toward shaking the readers from their passive attitude, thereby seeking a justice-minded response. Her decision to tell the story of the child’s body as the main source of the narrative passed on to Ugwu, her African houseboy, stems from his “earnest” interest in the story so that it can serve “a larger purpose” (*HYS*, 410).

Hence, through this narrative of spatiotemporally traveling images of child victimization, Ugwu’s document is able to make close allusions to the memory of the famine. Aiming to penetrate the intimate space of the Western readers leads then to facing pressing

issues in order to make them shift their incriminating stance to support the victim. The passage below is then emblematic of the novel's ethical call as children's starvation in Biafra "was the Nigerian weapon of war", but at the same time "sparked protests" (HYS, 237) and recognition around the world; not to mention that it also brought

Africa into Nixon's American campaign and made parents all over the world tell their children to eat up. Starvation propelled aid organizations to sneak-fly food into Biafra at night since both sides could not agree on routes. Starvation aided careers of photographers. And starvation made the international Red Cross its gravest emergency since the Second World War. (HYS, 237)

As a leitmotif, the undecidability of the word "starvation", used thrice in the passage, indicates its being situated within a context in which it collocates mostly with opposite concepts. There is in fact a semantic field of conflicting flows in the public sphere which shows that there is always a risk to gaining international recognition. Apart from its invoked activism, this world-famous event also benefited the media and political careerism of those who used the images they thought were newsworthy for their success. The opportunism which characterizes the Western attitude of the politicians and photographers in the passage indicates their way of viewing the crisis through a distancing prism, thus inhabiting a safe haven and avoiding identification with the victims. This contrast is corroborated by the image of starving African children as a springboard for American children's healthier well-being.

Obviously, a self-serving discourse based on affluent/poor also dominates the Western stance here but, most importantly, the dichotomy of white/black child is perpetually sustained through a future never promising the change and using the image of the Western subject as the exemplar of benevolence. The historical accounts conclude that the war in Nigeria did mobilize the NGOs to care for the "far-off communities" of the South, but this move also repackages the image of the third world as always necessarily in need of Western help, a common reasoning which defines the relationship of helper/receiver that oversimplifies the crisis (Heerten and Moses 2014, 177-178). So, the western readers are faced with a media that further justify the neo-colonial control over a population still unable to govern itself.

Written by Ugwu, the indicting tone in the poem below thus underlines the far-reaching image of African children's trauma which has come to inhabit the private space of the Western subjects. More dramatized though is its display of the libidinal investment of Western media in the endangered African children's body and their trauma that is set in stark contrast with the world of Western subjects' privacy. Reference to the whole poem stems from its spanning the various themes focused on the commodification of the African child,

Did you see photos of sixty-eight  
Of children with their hair becoming rust:  
Sickly patches nestled on those small heads,  
Then falling off, like rotten leaves on dust  
Imagine children with arms like toothpicks,  
With footballs for bellies and skin stretched thin.  
It was kwashiorkor-difficult word,  
A word that was not quite ugly, a sin.

You needn't imagine. There were photos  
Displayed in gloss-filled pages of your Life.  
Did you see? Did you feel sorry briefly,  
Then turn round to hold your lover or wife?

Their skin had turned the tawny of weak tea  
And showed cobwebs of vein and brittle bone;  
Naked children laughing, as if the man  
Would not take photos and then leave, alone. (*HYS*, 375)

The direct “you” in the address of this poem’s rhetoric questions aims to particularly prick the conscience of the Western reader and brings back the gross images of the 1968 starvation in Biafra. An engaging tone is sensed as it incriminates the hero/victim superiority-laden images of Western help which, by taking photos and leaving the “naked” children full of expectations “alone”, further isolate the victims’ cause. Instead of chronicling the particularities of the starvation, their focus is on the visual representations deemed sufficient to satisfy the Western readers’ fascination with images concentrating on African savagery. Such a binary produces conditions of underserved empathy of the African children and is rationalized by the manifest destiny of being diseased because of their being naturally “sinful”. The passive consumer is thus spared the trouble of even traveling in their imagination as their “efficient” media will be able to “drive home” the idea of what it means to be an African child. So, the “not quite ugly” picture of the kwashiorkor has been improved by the shine of the deceptively attractive “gloss-filled” pages that help to spark fascination about the images of African terror. The poem further accounts for the violence enacted by the distancing physical portrayals of the African child’s body, and its voice aims to parody the trivialization undertaken by descriptions of toothpicks and football-like bodies that are now side by side with the other materials in the magazine stand.

The concerns here are thus both ethical and epistemological as there is a direct link between the marginalization of African traumas and the fascination the colonial gaze primarily inscribes on the African body. “There are,” as such, “possibilities for knowledge even at the most commodified zones of culture” (Rothberg 2000, 184). The double meaning of “your Life”, however, points to the far-reaching effect of African trauma through the “Life” magazine and its ability to access the private “life” of Westerners as the intimacy of lovers has had to be haunted by the images of a trauma taking place beyond the West. Needing to feel sorry more than “briefly”, the Western subject is implicated in the Biafran trauma as responsible empathy binds everybody to take action.

The direct address of the poem is therefore meant to lay bare the means of rendering the images of suffering in ambiguous terms. The writing of a book within a book by Ugwu, for that matter, buttresses the sense of immediacy and makes writing a historical event in itself. In its “programming” and “productive” qualities as a realist discourse, the document assumes the character of “traumatic realism as both an epistemological and a social category” (Rothberg 200,110). In concordance with the “you” as a direct address in the poem, the writing of “The Book”, composed of a collection of materials – either written or oral–

synchronizes the act of reading in that it brings “the reader into the moment of witnessing the writing of history” as “the reader becomes an observer of events and of the act of turning those events into narrative” (Ngwira 2012, 43). The tiny details are then imbued with significance and instead of being dissolved they are put together with the quotidian regularity of Ugwu’s life. The rupture of the narrative linearity because of a houseboy’s book about history synchronized by our watching Ugwu “come into his own” (Postscript 5) fuses together the reader’s witnessing of historical writing process and the recovery of voice by a formerly objectified subject.

The power-relations of the knowing Western subject are re-evaluated by trying to render the predictable authority of the Western representation obsolete. This is apparent in the unexpected African writer who is only disclosed in the end while the readers’ votes have, with certainty, directed attention toward Richard, the English character who is expected to be the writer of the inset document. Concealing his identity which is in the making underneath the book’s composition, Ugwu’s book obliges us to see the process rather than the ready-made images of victimized and passive children. To trivialize the prefabricated images of Africa that condemn the African subjectivity to fixity, “The Book” compellingly guides the reader throughout the process of representing the African trauma in order to dismantle the misleading manoeuvres of the predictable in the Western media. The dominant kind of witnessing is then recast as particular by forcing the narrow attention of the dominant views of African subjectivity into rereading the novel in a new light after discovering the right author. Under the assumption that the Western reader will identify more with Richard, “The Book” challenges the reading process through the element of the unpredictable. In fact, the reader’s culturally endorsed views are geared toward a certain closure, but their views are to be altered by the anti-linearity of the novel and the unexpected authorship of an African boy.

Adichie’s novel has thus made a convincing case against the silencing of her community’s cause. As she holds on to the ethical imperative to bring the violence visited upon her people to the public attention, her, and many other Africans’, literary witnessing express the need to both document and fight the forces of silence in the public sphere. The concern with the past is, as such, not only that of retrieving one’s voice, but also it confronts the readers with throbbing issues that continue to prove the colonial enterprise still runs its course. Countering the readings that narrating guarantees a “working through” the painful repercussions of the past, Adichie’s text has proven that the mechanisms of colonial oppression are also perpetuated by Africans themselves and that she, as well as the readers of her text, is to be implicated to bear witness.

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