

ANGST FILLED NARRATIVES: EXPLORING TRAUMA IN ADICHIE'S HALF OF A YELLOW SUN

Chelsa Rarichan*

Ms. Aiswarya S

ABSTRACT

Trauma as a field of study dates back to the early twentieth century, the time when Sigmund Freud developed his theory of psychoanalysis, and discovered that psychological trauma was the basis of women's so-called hysteria. It was he who changed the meaning of the term trauma from a mere physical injury to psychological injury. Unlike the wounding of the body, the wounding of the mind is much more complex, which makes it a matter of recognition. In its most general definition, trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena. The fact that the event was overwhelming for the victim means that the victim was not ready to feel pain and anxiety, this delayed reaction is namely PTSD. Therefore this paper entitled "**Angst Filled Narratives: Exploring Trauma in Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun***" enumerates how human made catastrophic events like war have a great impact on the memory and psyche of the people thus traumatizing them for years and how they can be held personally across generations. Adichie's second novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), provides an ideal environment for this analysis as it is set in the backdrop of the Nigeria-Biafra War delineating psychological trauma through its main character's experience of war. The story of the Nigeria-Biafra War and its trauma is written from the perspective of Main character, Olanna, Ugwu and Richard as they were eyewitness to bloodbaths at different theaters of wars. The paper specifically

* Department of English, SVR NSS College, Vazhoor

enumerates how the central characters Olanna, Ugwu and Richard are haunted by the memories of the catastrophic event of the Nigeria-Biafra War, which in turn consequently developed psychological trauma and PTSD in them .

Key Words: Trauma, Memory, Adichie, PTSD, *Half of a Yellow Sun*.

INTRODUCTION

In its most primary origin, the Greek word 'trauma' referred to an injury inflicted on the body rather than on the mind. In its later usage, it is used more and more to refer to conditions concerning the mind (Caruth "Unclaimed" 3). Unlike the wounding of the body, which is a simple and in most cases healable injury, wounding of the mind is much more complex because it is not experienced in real time which makes it harder not register for our consciousness. Trauma as a field of study dates back to the early twentieth century, the time when Sigmund Freud developed his theory of psychoanalysis, and discovered that psychological trauma was the basis of women's so-called hysteria. This condition was a recurring phenomenon during the two World Wars, but it was not until the war in Vietnam that the 'disease' got real recognition. In 1980, the American Psychiatric Association defined:

This long-recognized but frequently ignored phenomenon under the title 'Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder' (PTSD), which included the symptoms of what had previously been called shell-shock, combat stress, delayed stress syndrome, and traumatic neurosis, and referred to responses both human and natural catastrophes. (Caruth "Trauma" 11).

The impact of trauma theory in literary studies was felt from the publication of Cathy Caruth's collections of essays named *Trauma: Explorations In Memory* (1995) and *Unclaimed Experience*:

Trauma, Narrative and History(1996) which enumerates some important definitions of trauma. The following, by Caruth herself, seems to sum up what they all have in common, in its most general definition, trauma describes "An overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (Caruth "Unclaimed"11). The principal feature of trauma is that the victim is not aware of the trauma at the time of the occurrence. Because of the unexpectedness of the event, the brain is not able to process the shock immediately, thus creating a gap between the occurrence of the trauma and the return to full consciousness.

Traumatic narratives, are characterized by the non-linearity or the nonconventional beginning-middle-end. Trauma symptoms seem to resemble (post)modern literary techniques such as, Repetition, Focalization, lacunae, confusion, open or undecided endings, and disrupted chronology. 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 thus reflecting an important element of postmodernism. This repetition also implies the depth and intensity of the trauma in the mind of the victim and the haunting nature of the event which provide recurring images in her thought process. The order of scenes could be scrambled, or traumatic experiences can be hard to situate in a clearly defined time frame 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, especially in Adichie's Second novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* as she tries to get across the trauma of the Nigeria - Biafra war through this novel. Though it may not refer directly to a trauma related contexts through examining which of these elements Adichie uses and how she uses them, the way in which she wants to represent the trauma of

the past will become clear, which can be further used in elucidating the trauma of main character Olanna.

The elements that are relevant here are the use of lacunae and the disrupted chronology. This novel is structured in a non-chronological way where the first part covers the early sixties, the second part jumps ahead to the late sixties, and progressively the third part returns to the moment where the first one left off, and the fourth 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. It is in the second part that Olanna lives her traumatic experiences that will have a big impact on her life.

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.

In the novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun* Adichie attempts to capture the traumatic aftermath of colonization and the civil war among common people. The story is presented to us from the perspective of main characters of the novel Olanna, Richard and Ugwu. 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. This analysis outlines the origin of the traumatic effects in the different characters, beginning with and mainly enumerating the trauma of the character Olanna. The analysis starts with the situation of the 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 most detail in the novel.

To unravel her story and her struggle, this analysis drew on the trauma theory developed by Cathy Caruth. The introduction she wrote for the book, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, is greatly influential and the concept of PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) is key to her theory. She describes PTSD 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 behaviors 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" 4)

On analysis of the character of Olanna it is found that 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 "Trauma" 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 when she experienced it. As is mentioned above, the experience is as a film playing before her eyes, while she is merely viewing it and not participating emotionally. Let's now take a glimpse at what experience led her towards a traumatic experience. In the novel *Half of a yellow sun*, the traumatic experience of Olanna revolves around the memory of her Cousin Arize, Aunty Ifeka and Uncle Mbaezi, who were victims of the massacre in Kano. Her trauma stems from witnessing the dead mutilated bodies of her family members Arize, Aunty Ifeka, and Uncle Mbazi: which is penned by Adichie in her book as follows "Aunty Ifeka lay on the veranda. The cuts of her naked body were smaller, dotting her arms and legs like slightly parted red lips" (Adichie "Half" 138). The massacre witnessed by Olanna in Kano, left an indelible scar on her psyche.

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" (Adichie 138). She does not yet realize what has happened, as evident from her reaction that she shows to Mohammed dragging her away from the compound. She was more traumatized when she witnessed the dead body of her pregnant cousin Arize who was due anytime. Well remarked in the following lines; "But she could not leave without Arize. Arize was due anytime. Arize needed to be close to a doctor" (Adichie 138). 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. Caruth in her book, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, uses this term, 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, and the person is in a period of latency, it is simply not fully experienced as it occurs. This was pointed out and illustrated in the previous Paragraph, where we encountered how difficult it was for Olanna to realize what is happening.

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

paralyzes 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" (Adichie 147). This paralysis lasted for several weeks; and she was paralysed physically and mentally by the trauma. She also suffers from what is

called in the Chapter Thirteen, of the novel by Adichie as "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"(Adichie147).

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, the rolled eyes of the child's head in the calabash and the old skin tone- aflat . . . that lay in the yard" (Adichie 147). This event very well elucidates how this experience had a long registration on Olanna's Psyche.

This 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 in his essay *Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes Of Listening* : "The not telling of the story serves as a perpetuation of its tyranny" (Laub 64). According to him, 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"(Laub 57). 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"(Adichie

147). This failure of language is another important technique of traumatic narrative.

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 Aunt 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" (Adichie 154). 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 "Trauma" 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" (Adichie 154).

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" (Caruth "Trauma" 152-153). In this statement, there seems to be a paradox: the memory is absent and at the same time 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 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 Aunt Ifeka and Uncle Mbazi, that did not feel like life being lived on suspended time"(Adichie 176). 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"(Caruth "Trauma" 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"(Adichie 184). We also learn that she is "too exhausted even to cry, and with only enough energy to swallow the pills Odenigbo slipped in her mouth"(Adichie 186). The situation is worsened by the accounts of some of the visitors. Some of them say that "the Okafors had lost a son and a family of four in Zaria, the Ibe daughter had not returned from Kaura-Namoda, the Onyekachi family had lost eight people in Kano"(Adichie 186).

It is perhaps in her testimony to Ugwu that Olanna manages to work through some of the 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" (Adichie 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. In his book, *Writing History Writing Trauma* he indicates the process in which "the person tries to gain critical distance on a problem and to distinguish between past, present, and future"(Lacapra 143).

Adichie uses this to show how narration may have a therapeutic effect, as the writing of her novel may have had for her in order to escape from her own postcolonial trauma. She also emphasizes the importance of the writing of a narrative as an integral part of articulating it. While discussing all the traumatic after-effects present in the novel, the analysis will cover *Olanna* separately from others as even if some of the symptoms they experience are the same, but seeing as the origins are so different, it is necessary to treat them separately.

The novel is also narrated from the perspective of two other main characters of the novel Richard and Ugwu. Both of them are also witness to the terrible consequences of the war. The horrific events during the war had a traumatic effect on the psyche of two, which is briefly elucidated in the following section. In the case of Richard, he sees how a man, a custom officer called Nnaemeka, gets shot because he is Igbo; Richard spent a few minutes talking to this man before he was killed, and witnessing his violent death from so close, this shocks Richard to his core, " 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"(Adichie 143). The way in which Richard experiences his traumatic aftermath is described in the following quote:

He had often wished that he would lose his mind, or that his memory would suppress himself, but instead everything took on a terrible transparency and he had only to close his eyes to see the freshly dead bodies on the floor of the airport and to read all the pitch of scream. His mind remained lucid.(Adichie 156)

In the case of Ugwu, 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, as 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 quick and felt his own climax . . . a self-loathing release" (Adichie 341). 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, unraveling before their eyes, is recorded moment to moment through the manner of writing; it is almost as if time slows down.

Analyzing within this framework, Olanna, after discovering the massacred bodies of her family members - loses control of her bodily functions and suffers psychosomatic paralysis of her legs, flashbacks, and paranoia - all these symptoms bring out the fact that Olanna is traumatized psychologically and the event marked a deep wound on her psyche. She attempts to narrate her traumatic experience; however, other characters silence her. She thus begins to experience dark swoops and panic attacks. In case of Richard, trauma developed as he saw a customs officer was shot before him, just because he was an Igbo. In case of Ugwu, trauma developed as he was forced to rape a girl in a bar. Thus on analyzing the novel in the light of trauma theory and the post(modern) elements and its narrative techniques like, failure of language, disrupted chronology, with the following traumatic symptoms bring out the novel *Half of Yellow Sun* with characters traumatized physically and psychologically somehow affected by the drastic events of Nigeria-Biafra war.

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