

# Evaluating War: The Impact of War in Chimamandangoziadichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*

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## Abstract

The evocative tale, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, and the captured impact and immediacy of the Nigeria-Biafra war through the lives of the characters attest to Adichie's imaginative ability, creativity and remarkable research skills. War adversely affects combatants and non-combatants alike, both physically and emotionally. The terror and horror spread by the violence of war disrupts lives and severs relationships and families, leaving individuals and communities emotionally distressed. This paper makes an earnest effort to depict impact of war on the characters. This study aims at showing the writer's point of view in treating the negative effects of the war and its atmosphere both physically and psychologically.

**Keywords:** war, starvation, malnutrition, federal force, toxic material.

During the past few centuries, Africa faced many civil and international wars. Even today the continent seems to be unrest and unsettled. Most wars are fought to put an end to the rule of colonialization and get liberation from foreign rulers. In order to usurp or detain fertile lands which are not many in Africa, wars often take place in densely populated region. It is very difficult to study and analyse exactly how these wars affect the environment balance. There is nothing worse than war and all wars are environmental catastrophes. Armies destroy farms and livestock; they go through forests like termites; they foul waters; they spread disease; they bombard the countryside with heavy armaments and leave unexploded shells; they deploy chemical poisons that linger far longer than they do; they leave detritus and garbage behind.

Regarded as one of the Nigeria's most talented young writers, Adichie is recognized for her well – crafted stories and novels that explore the political, social and ecological repercussions of recent Nigerian history. Her novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* is one of the latest contributions to Nigerian civil war literature. It is based on the Nigeria –

Biafra war of 1967-70. Through the voices of her characters, Adichie expresses how the Nigerian civil wars have devastated human territories and settlement. Commenting on the novel, John C. Hawley notes that it sheds light on the effects of the war on the characters than on the politics of the war (20). The air raids destroy houses and forests, the atmosphere, and the waters are polluted or destroyed. The toxic materials used in the weapons, the destruction of trees and homes in Adichie's novel speak of the environmental degradation. This chapter, therefore, focuses on environmental exploitation portrayed in Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*. The preceding discussion provides an awareness that the wars has brought horrible changes in the whole eco – system and steps should be seriously taken to avoid such terrible situation in future.

Nigerian civil war brought untold miseries and irrecoverable damages to humanity and environment. Weapons of mass destruction bombarded human settlements and killed millions and millions of people. Properties were looted; women were molested and raped ruthlessly. Many children became orphans at their tender

age and their future looked bleak and hopeless. More than 2 million people became refugees. Many of the water resources were destroyed. Only 45% of the people had access to safe drinking water. The war has a devastating effect on the environment too. The environment is always a casualty of war. National parks housing endangered species are often affected for exploitation of minerals and other resources. Refugees hunt wildlife for bush rat, either to consume or sell it. Farmers burn parts of the forest to apply as farmland, and corporate logging contributes to the access of poachers to bush rat.

The Nigeria civil war provides an opportunity for humanity to debase the animal component of the ecosystem. According to Donovan, “[we] should not kill, eat, torture, and exploit animals because they do not want to be so treated” in such way (375). Environmental critics argue that all life-forms deserve dignity and respect. In relation to Adichie’s novel, one finds a violation of Donovan’s view in different ramification. For instance, the readers are informed that Auntie Ifeka kills a chicken any time that Olanna pays them a visit in Kano. Auntie Ifeka’s action represents an abuse of the animal component of the environmental system, and as a further reading of the novel shows, Auntie Ifeka is not alone in the guilt of animal abuse. The case of Auntie Ifeka represents a blatant abuse of animal rights. In fact, in Donovan’s words, “Auntie Ifeka fails to grant —status . . . to whom . . . [she] can communicate cognitively and emotionally as to their needs and wishes” (309).

Adichie’s novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* pictures the horrible situations created by the air raids. Several commentators have condemned the indiscriminate air raids and bombing of civilian locations during the Nigerian civil war. Vast, greenish and beautiful forests were suddenly changed as the cloud of smoke. According to Africans, tree stands between heaven and earth and is associated with creation as well as the underworld. The tree is a maternal symbol: a protector and provider who gives fruit, other foods and medicines, provides a reservoir for water, protects against the elements and evil spirits. In many African myths and stories, the tree is portrayed as an ancestral symbol of wisdom, authority and custom,

providing a bond between the dead and the living. In the novel, the readers witness Richard showing Kainene a tree that has been split perhaps by air raid : “ ‘Look at the tree,’ he told her, pointing. It had been cleanly split in two, from the branches down to the stem. One half still stood, slightly tilted, while the other lay on the ground. ‘It seems recent,’ Kainene said. ‘My uncle flew a plane in the war. He bombed Germany. It’s strange to think of him doing something like this.’ ” (HYS312). In another occasion Richard sees, “His favorite orange tree was gone. Many of the trees had been cut, and the orchard now had stretches of cultivated grass.” (HYS426).

Elsewhere in the novel, the reader notices the destruction of the forests after Ugwu’s conscription. As Ugwu and the older soldiers detonate the bombs for the annihilation of their Nigerian counterparts, the grass catches fire and burns from the explosion. When a woman from the refugee camp dashed into the yard, shouting, waving a green branch, Olanna is in wonder where she got it. Because “the plants and trees around were scorched, blown bare by the dusty winds. The earth was fallow.” (HYS411). Thus Adichie clearly describes how the environment became a sympathetic victim of war. Consequently it brings adverse effect on the people of Nigeria. Where it is possible to gloss over the destruction of the forests, the importance of forest to ecological stability and to humanity makes it necessary to reflect on the significance of its destruction. Health of forests has an impact on the health of soils and the availability of ground and surface water for irrigation and drinking.

According to African culture forest trees may house the spirits of ancestors as well as those of the newborn. Forests are viewed in both positive and negative lights as sources of evil as well as power and munificence, as providers for, and hindrances to development. The mystical qualities of specific forest resources often play a crucial role in traditional healing practices. Forests provide the venue for religious, social, and healing ceremonies. Forest trees, the links between the sky and earth, often symbolise links between the spiritual world of ancestors and people.

Franklin D. Roosevelt says that, “A nation that

destroys its soils destroys itself. Forests are the lungs of our land, purifying the air and giving fresh strength to our people". Deforestation may increase water flow over the land's surface, as rain will fall directly to the ground, no longer being impeded by the vegetational cover. This practice may lead to an increase in the magnitude and frequency of flooding, soil erosion increased sediment loads in rivers, slopes instability, and degradation of adjacent lands. According to Bina Agarwal, "forests provide habitat for some animals, species of plants, and microbes" (105). It means that deforestation caused by wars engenders and threatens the survival of some species that are rendered homeless as a consequence of deforestation. The incidence of air raids also makes it possible to argue that some species could lose their lives in the same way that the raids destroy the trees that constitute the forest and provide habitat for those life-forms." A family of birds had nested on the roof of the classroom." (HYS359).

The environment destruction has severe effect on the landscape and on water. Air raids destroy beautiful forests and water channels. Thus, the environment changed into unhealthy, insecure region for the people to live. With its lethal and destructive capabilities, the bombs are able to destroy the water channels and even the land. On one raid occasion, for instance, "A bomb crater, wide enough to swallow a lorry, had split the road at the school entrance in two" (HYS279). The destruction of the road is one of several instances of landscape distortion occasioned by the novel.

Besides the physical despoliation of the land, one also notices the impact of toxic materials on the landscape. Agriculture is the backbone of the country. 80 % of the population depends on agriculture. War always has a destroying impact on the environment and more specifically on the agriculture. When war occurs, people lose most of their croplands because of bombings, ashes of weapons and intentional burnings. Soil becomes useless for farming. The soil quality reduces considerably and Kainene's farm fails to yield good harvests. Adichie describes, "the crops failed. They failed because the land was poor and the harmattan was harsh

and ... there was nothing to plant" (HYS405).

Fresh water is one of the most essential natural resources. It is a vital factor for human existence. Big rivers create cultures. It is a center factor in the life and culture of all humanity. Africans are gifted with many rivers, such as the Niger River. They are guaranteed flourishing agriculture through these rivers. Despite the fact that water covers about seventy percent of the earth surface, availability and accessibility of water has remained a great course for worry all over the world. The toxic wastes from the use of technology make the land less arable. Fertilizers and manures become the means to engender soil fertility.

However, such palliative measures are detrimental to the water bodies. As the chemicals are transported to the water bodies by rainfall and wind, the waters are polluted and made unsafe for human use. However, such waters are the main source of the water needs of rural Biafra. The novel reveals the problem of water scarcity. Women are forced to reuse water for preparing the staple food, cassava. The action of the women suggests that the scarcity of water might have been occasioned partly by deforestation or by restrictions imposed by air raids and the brutalities of the Federal soldiers. In other words, a reading of Adichie's novel demonstrates the cruelty against animals, the despoliation of forest resources, of water, and the physical landscape. Of course the interdependence of nature and culture means that the foregoing destruction will have far-reaching implication for humanity.

**'The World Was Silent When We Died' is a book within a book, telling the story of the slaughter, starvation and suffering of the Ibo people during the Nigerian civil war. The fifth part of the book is also dedicated to starvation.** The word 'starvation' appears eight times at the beginning of each sentence, piercing the conscience of the reader with known images of starving African children and making it the main reason for the Biafra's fall.

It is estimated that over a million people died, many from disease and starvation, during the war. Severe malnutrition leads to the development of several diseases including Kwashiorkor. It is a disease produced by severe protein deficiency, characterized by retarded growth,

changes in skin and hair pigment, oedema, and pathologic changes in the liver, including fatty infiltration, necrosis, and fibrosis. The epilogue of Ugwu's book is a poem inspired by the ones he had heard in the Nsukka campus where Professor Okeoma used to read out his poems. Ugwu's poem titled 'Were You Silent When We Died?' is based on the Biafra photographs of 1968, images of "children with arms like toothpicks / With footballs for bellies and skin stretched thin." (HYS375).

Similarly, while men fight wars and may be said to be the ultimate destroyers of the environment, the character of Jomo epitomizes a masculine attempt to beautify and care for the environment. At the beginning of the novel, the readers see the beautiful flowers in the setting description and Jomo is introduced as the gardener responsible for maintaining the aesthetics of Odenigbo's house. Later in the novel too, Richard's house benefits from the touch of Jomo's gardening skills. Jomo's actions suggest that, beyond participating in warfare that destroy the environment, people also engage in sustainable practices to improve the environment.

After the war, the Igbo regain their territories within the Biafran enclave, but they are desolation. Odenigbo's house in Abba is devastated because "Bushes had sprung up everywhere; small huts were completely swallowed in browned grasses. A shrub was growing at the gate of their compound" (HYS415). As Odenigbo drives his family into Nsukka after the war on roads pockmarked with bullets and bomb craters, they notice the "buildings were blackened, roofs blown off, walls half standing. Here and there were black carcasses of burnt cars. An eerie quiet reigned" (HYS415). The once serene and beautiful environment of the university which thrills Ugwu now tells the story of devastation.

This chapter highlights how the environment encountered untold miseries inflicted by the Nigerian civil war. The war causes environmental destruction and the excessive use of atomic weapons always pose a threat to the survival of the organism and this beautiful planet. It is well known fact that most of today's killer diseases are caused by toxins produced by waste pollutants dumped into the environment.

A healthy environment is unavoidable for mankind to live happily and comfortably. When the environment is threatened, man faces innumerable sufferings and problems. Air, water, food are basic elements for the survival of humanity. When one harms the environment, one faces air pollution, water pollution and the scarcity of food. This interlinked relation between man and environment is very clearly stressed in Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*. The novelist treats environment not as an inanimate object but she represents it as a human character with human emotions and feelings. This innovative approach hails Adichie as one of the most distinctive as well as distinguished African writers of the modern era. As advocated by the novelist, one must have the ecological conscience. Then only the earth will become a safer place for all to live in union.

## References

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