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Achebe, Ofoegbu, and Adichie on Biafra A Lingerin Nightmare

ABSTRACT

This essay considers the impact of the 1967–1970 Biafran War on ordinary people’s lives, through a comparative study of Achebe’s *Girls at War* (1972), Ofoegbu’s *Blow the Fire* (1985), and Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006). The three books, a collection of short stories by the acclaimed Nigerian writer, the memoirs of a British lady married to a Nigerian recording her experience as a displaced civilian, and the second novel of a young Igbo writer born seven years after the war, provide a rich platform for a multi-faceted approach of the war-shattered country from an insider’s point of view. The study focuses on the impact of the armed conflict on daily lives and relationships, and reveals the festering wounds left by the war on Igbo conscience as manifested in its literature.

Introduction

As remarked by Keith Booker, “the Nigerian civil war is widely regarded as a watershed in Nigerian literary as well as political history”:

Numerous important works of poetry, drama, fiction and non-fiction were directly inspired by the events of the war, though this inspiration is often so direct that the line between fiction and non-fiction is extremely unclear.¹

Literature on the Nigerian Civil War, branded “a hybrid that is neither a novel nor a history textbook,”² is indeed central to Nigerian literature – mostly novels, the preferred genre among the Igbo, but also some fifty-five memoirs or factual non-fiction accounts written on the war. The blockade imposed on the secessionist region, the relative peace enjoyed by the rest of the Federation

¹ M. Keith Booker, *The Chinua Achebe Encyclopedia* (Westport CT & London: Greenwood, 2003): 174.

² Chinyere Nwahunanya, “The Aesthetics of Nigerian War Fiction,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 37.3 (Fall 1991): 431. Cf. also Jane Bryce, “Conflict and Contradiction in Women’s Writing on the Nigerian Civil War,” *African Languages and Cultures* 4.1 (1991): 29.

throughout the conflict, and the heavy restrictions and distortions affecting information filtering out of Biafra at the time, partly explain that authors of this literature are mostly igbo insiders, people who experienced the war firsthand from within the Biafran enclave, with few female authors among them.³

“Very little was written during the war – at the time, Igbo people “meant to live at all costs [...] to see the end so that [they] could tell [their] friends on the other side what it meant to be at war.”⁴ Florence Nwapa managed to write only one short story, “My Soldier Brother,” published in *This Is Lagos* in 1971, and the only novel written during the conflict, Nwankwo’s *Road to Udim*, was produced in German and initially published in Germany. Literary publications started in the 1970s but most of the novels and non-fictional accounts of the war started coming out in the 1980s, as if writers had felt the need to take a break and recover before re-living those three years. The political situation in Nigeria in the early 1970s was not conducive to such publications, either, and Nigerians were too traumatized to appreciate accounts of a war that had torn the country apart. The three writers considered here – one man, two women, two of them Nigerian born and one ‘Nigerwife’⁵ – may have written at different times, adopting different styles, yet all three are indeed true witnesses of the war.

Ordinary People on the Run

Jane Bryce’s evaluation of Nwapa’s *Never Again* could be applied to each of the texts studied here: “what it does very well [...] is to give an insight into the situation of ordinary, non combatant and non-political people, trying to live their lives.”⁶ National politics never come to the fore: no matter what

³ This has been decried by many female critics and often regretted but has not been fully investigated. Among those female writers were two expatriate women married to Igbo: Leslie Ofoegbu and Rosita Umelo, representative of the important number of expatriate wives who settled in the country in the sixties. Born after the war, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie testifies to the sequels left by the bloodshed.

⁴ Florence Nwapa, *Never Again* (Enugu: Nwamife, 1975): 5.

⁵ ‘Nigerwives’ is the name of a powerful Nigerian women’s association aiming at helping foreign women to integrate. Its members are mostly women married to Nigerians.

⁶ Bryce, “Conflict and Contradiction in Women’s Writing on the Nigerian Civil War,” 36.

sympathy writers or their characters might have felt for the Biafran cause, it is daily life that fills the pages of their books, even if “telling stories about people’s experiences is political.”⁷

Achebe’s collection *Girls At War*, particularly the title-story, descend into the depths of disintegration brought about by the conflict. The book has attracted critical attention, partly because of the writer’s prominent role at the time and the centrality of this theme in his work.⁸ In the first days of Biafra’s independence, both of the main characters in “Girls at War” come to enlist into the army, “burning with readiness to bear arms in defence of the exciting new nation.”⁹ They meet again some time later at the Awka check-point, as the war slowly moves southward. The girl is now employed as a “local vigilante” under police constables and displays two qualities in her new job: she does not give preferential treatment to anyone, and seems immune to pressure and intimidation, as “you people gave me a job to do” (104). Eighteen months later, “things had gone very bad” and behaviours are sketched against a war-time background of “death and starvation, resignation and defiance” (106). Achebe’s two characters are among the “many at this time who had no other desire than to corner whatever good things were still going and to enjoy themselves to the limit.” Far from the heroism of the first days and the courage of the war front, they are presented as ordinary people desperate to live, with “some goodness and some badness” (106). Nwankwo spends his days in search of relief food – rice, beans, and gari. Although the food he gets is for two families that include more than ten children, the sight of a hungry and ragged crowd watching him fill his boot makes him feel guilty, a privileged man using his personal contacts to jump the queue and get preferential treatment.

By contrast, Ofoegbu’s *Blow the Fire*, a survivor’s story, provides a unique insight into the plight of displaced populations, especially on the family unit: the couple and children – their own and the many they fostered and cared for

⁷ Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, “From the Horse’s Mouth: The Politics of Remembrance in Women’s Writing on the Nigerian Civil War,” *Matatu: Journal for African Culture and Society* 29–30 (2005): 229.

⁸ Cf. *Beware Soul Brother* (Enugu: Nwamife, 1971) and his last novel, *Anthills of the Savannah* (London: Heinemann, 1987).

⁹ Chinua Achebe, *Girls at War and Other Stories* (1972; London, Heinemann, 1986): 103. Unless otherwise indicated, further page references to Achebe’s collection are in the main text.

throughout the conflict. As for Adichie's novel, based on eye-witness accounts and "imaginative truths," it takes readers through another survival story, that of a young Igbo couple, their adopted baby daughter, and a dedicated houseboy. The main characters studied abroad, lived in Lagos, visited family in Kano, and settled in Nsukka. Then Biafra loses its university town and they have to leave UNN.¹⁰ "They drove in a frenzied silence, past policemen in blood-spattered uniforms, past vultures perched by the roadside, past boys carrying looted radios."¹¹ On the way, they met refugees, "more and more each day, new faces on the streets, at the public borehole, in the market. Women knocked at the door often [...]. They came with their thin, naked children."¹²

All three texts share a common sympathy for ordinary people dragged into a conflict that leaves them destitute, fragile and hungry; they provide a multifaceted approach and insiders' points of view on the impact of the conflict on daily life and relationships, work and leisure. They also reveal a shift in values, changing attitudes to life and the presence of women at the heart of the war zone, central to the preservation of life. In the end,

Women fought 'on all fronts', in order to bring normalcy (or a semblance of it) to an abnormal situation – a task they saw both as a moral obligation and a civic duty. As the line between public and private, personal and political, individual and collective became blurred, women fought their daily battles by playing multiple roles.¹³

Women's Stories

The question has been asked: was the war experience "not shared in the same way by men and women?"¹⁴ Although the vast majority of writers on the subject have so far been mostly male, women stand out in the texts under

¹⁰ University of Nigeria, Nsukka, founded in 1960 and temporarily called the University of Biafra during the war.

¹¹ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun* (London: Fourth Estate, 2006): 148.

¹² Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, 285.

¹³ Obioma Nnaemeka, "Fighting on All Fronts: Gendered Spaces, Ethnic Boundaries, and the Nigerian Civil War," *Dialectical Anthropology* 22.3–4 (December 1997): 253.

¹⁴ Jane Bryce, "Conflict and Contradiction in Women's Writing on the Nigerian Civil War," *African Languages and Cultures* 4.1 (1991): 29.

consideration, in two different ways, Achebe highlighting women's vulnerability, Ofoegbu and Adichie their resilience.

Girls at War has been widely studied. For Amuta, it displays "one of [Achebe's] major themes, the moral predicament of the Nigerian womenfolk in the war situation."¹⁵ In the eponymous short story, Gladys's friend, Augusta, has been taken to Libreville for a shopping spree by her "powerful boyfriend" and "will come back on an arms plane loaded with shoes, wigs, pants, bras, cosmetics and what have you, which she will then sell and make thousands of pounds." Achebe's narrator comments: "you girls are really at war" (114). Gladys, the main character, is "a school girl" who once cherished a "beautiful faith" in the struggle; now betrayed by the very men she trusted to lead their people into the war, she is reduced to "number six" and turned into a prostitute – "a head of stockfish, that's all, or one American dollar, and they are ready to tumble into bed" (116). Changes in Gladys's behaviour are first revealed by a change of clothes. Her initial appearance is that of "a beautiful girl in a breastly blue jersey, khaki jeans and canvas shoes with the new style hair plait that gave a girl a very defiant look" (104). Within a matter of months, she gets a new look, with "a high-tinted wig and a very expensive skirt and low-cut blouse. Her shoes, obviously from Gabon, must have cost a fortune. In short, [...] she had to be in the keep of some well-placed gentleman, one of those piling up money out of the war." She then shocks Nwankwo, the male protagonist, "by the readiness with which she followed him to bed and by her language" (118). The girl's change of behaviour could have led to her condemnation, yet she is clearly presented as "a victim of the prevailing circumstances" (120). Faced with what he considers a tragic development, Nwankwo "was immediately and thoroughly ashamed of himself. He hated the parties and frivolities to which his friends clung like drowning men. And to talk so approvingly of them because he wanted to take a girl home" (111). In the closing pages of the story, Nwankwo articulates his thoughts more clearly: "Gladys, he thought, was just a mirror reflecting a society that has gone completely rotten and maggoty at the centre. The mirror itself was intact; a lot of smudge but no more. All that was needed was a clean duster" (119). He then feels duty-bound to take care of her, because she has revealed to him his own change and faults. The last page proves the girl's

¹⁵ Chidi Amuta, "Literature of the Nigerian Civil War," in *Perspectives on Nigerian Literature, 1700 to the Present*, vol. 1, ed. Yemi Ogunbiyi (Lagos: Guardian Books, 1988): 89.

moral superiority. Feeling guilty, on the other hand, changes Nwankwo's behaviour: some time before, he left an old woman by the roadside; he now picks up the young wounded soldier – this is what the girl has achieved without uttering a word. At the start of the air raid, she goes back to the car to help the soldier out, knowing full well that it might cost her life – as indeed it does – while Nwankwo runs to safety. Here, women are shown as holding the key to societal improvement and men's salvation or damnation – a huge responsibility. This is a far cry from feminists' blaming of Achebe for his denigrating presentation of women; the writer, in a 1968 interview, confirmed his stand and revealed how he gathered details for his short story:

You find a new spirit [...], a determination, in fact. I was in Europe for about three weeks a while ago. When I got back, I found young girls had taken over the job of controlling traffic from the police. They were really doing it by themselves; no one asked them to.¹⁶

Interestingly, "Girls At War" reveals a progressive male change of attitude towards women. At first, Nwankwo did not believe in girls' ability to fight:

He didn't doubt that the girls and the women took themselves seriously, they obviously did. But so did the little kids who marched up and down the streets at the time drilling with sticks and wearing their mothers' soup bowls for steel helmets. (105)

The way Nwankwo talks about girls here is not only derogatory, it displays his having absorbed the traditional view of womenfolk as weak, unreliable and obtuse. Far from confirming this view, Gladys's behaviour shames him and "he simply could not sneer at the girls again" (105).

The main character of *Blow the Fire*, on the other hand, is a Scottish-born girl who falls in love, spends three years combining the roles of a Biafran wife, mother, and worker, and comes out of the war with "a treasure of memories happy and sad. A real education!"¹⁷ Through her, readers gain access to a group of unsung heroes, expatriate wives – that Sierra Leonean with six children (92), or the other who died of cancer after refusing to be flown out (2) – who all chose to stay in the new country at the onset of the war. "Of over two hundred foreign wives of Igbo and other Eastern Nigerians

¹⁶ Achebe, in Rajat Neogy, "On Biafra: A Conversation with Chinua Achebe," *Transition* 75–76 (1997): 222.

¹⁷ Leslie Jean Ofoegbu, *Blow the Fire* (Enugu: Tana, 1985): 167.

who lived in the war affected areas east of the Niger at the beginning of 1967, less than twenty remained at the end of the war” (2), and Ofoegbu’s memoirs bear witness to the daily struggle of one who stayed. Her book reveals women packing the car for evacuation, teaching, cooking, taking care of kids, staying all week in the village while husbands work in town, trying hard to make ends meet. It introduces readers to the author herself and her role as a worker in an orphanage, a nurse in a refugee camp, a relief worker, a mission teacher and motivator.

Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun*¹⁸ (2006) is both very different from and strikingly similar to the other two books. Born seven years after the war, the author confesses to having taken “many liberties” with history. Having read many books (listed on the back page of her novel) on the subject to get her inspiration, she goes on to say that “some of the characters are based on actual persons” and acknowledges her family’s invaluable contribution in sharing their memories of life in Biafra. The novel, although centred around two twin sisters from the upper-middle class and their lovers, presents a great number of other women: aged mothers keeping to the village, wealthy traders, hawkers, female lecturers, quiet housewives, chatty neighbours. All further illustrate Achebe’s point: they welcome the secession as liberation, take active part in the ‘win-the-war’ effort, and take to the road now and again with scraps of food and little more, “life being lived on suspended time.”¹⁹ The style goes to great lengths to show how the conflict exacerbates feelings, thus contributing to voice what the other two writers had kept under their breath. The whole book is clearly haunted by the northern massacres of 1966,²⁰ whose graphic descriptions and distressing memories are branded into the novel’s fabric. At the centre of it crouches “the woman with the calabash [and] the child’s head inside: scruffy plaits falling across the dark-brown face, eyes completely white, eerily open, a mouth in a small surprised O” (82).

¹⁸ This is the emblem of Biafra: a yellow sun which has just started rising from the horizon but is half-hidden from sight (Biafra’s national anthem hailed the country as ‘the land of the rising sun’).

¹⁹ Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, 185.

²⁰ Eghosa E. Osaghae, *Crippled Giant: Nigeria Since Independence* (London: C. Hurst, 1998): 63: “Between May and September 1966, an estimated 80–100,000 Easterners were killed and several thousands more wounded in different parts of the North. By the end of September, Ojukwu concluded that the safety of Easterners living outside the region could no longer be guaranteed and asked them to return home.”

This silent picture ripples through the pages as Olanna, the main character, remembers her gazing into the bowl. “She saw the little girl’s head with the ashy-grey skin and the plaited hair and rolled-back eyes and open mouth [...]. The train had stopped with a rusty screech” and as she went down, she still thought “about the plaited hair resting in the calabash” (149).

A Family Focus

All three authors describe families torn apart by events and illustrate ways in which the war affected them. In “Girls At War,” a couple brought together by the events for a brief moment provides a vivid illustration of the global shifting and questioning of traditional values, as they struggle to reconcile pre-war values and moral standards with the immediate survival instinct. “Sugar Baby” describes three friends poring over one of the war casualties, that of a budding couple destroyed by the man’s addiction to sugar. The last of the three stories on Biafra, “Civil Peace,” introduces readers to a stubbornly optimistic, close-knit Christian family unit focused on success and making it through the war against all odds, without losing its positive outlook. All three stories focus on gender relations and the war-threatened family unit.

Ofoegbu described her own narrative as the “account of our family’s experiences”²¹ written from memory and based on personal notes, diaries, and photocopies of letters written to friends and family during the war. It is the story of a couple’s choice to stay together in the war zone, raising three children and fostering orphans. “We were heading, as a family, from one era to another” (163). Reflecting on her war experience as she faced workmates’ questions, she writes:

Why did I stay, I have often been asked. [...] I stayed because I had a firm conviction that marriage is meant for better or worse, not so that in bad times you can opt out of your responsibilities. Len felt that he could never face his people if he took the easy way out by leaving the country on his wife’s back.
(2)

Olanna’s wealthy parents have no such scruples, as they explain: “your father and I have finalised our plans. We have paid somebody who will take us to Cameroon and get us on a flight from there to London.”²²

²¹ Ofoegbu, *Blow the Fire*, 2.

²² Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, 188.

Nwankwo's driver, too, had a family: "a wife and six, or was it seven? Children and a salary of ten pounds a month" when cassava had reached a pound per cup in the market.²³ All three authors present families, especially children, as burdens of love as well as extra mouths to feed, at a time when food was scarce. If couples' stability was a concern for writers, children's safety was equally high on the agenda, affecting daily life and decisions. The fact that her children were very young at the time definitely influenced Ofoegbu's decision to stay and keep the family unit together. Most children in Biafra did not go to school regularly during the war,²⁴ and Ofoegbu's text introduces readers to Nnenna, the abandoned little girl they rescue, "begging a meal here, a place to sleep there and moving on as soon as she felt stronger. A grim picture of life for a child who looked no more than three or four years old."²⁵ Behind her, in the background, lie refugee camps where

Lack of protein coupled with general malnutrition reduced children and babies to skeletons or bloated balloons of creatures or a mixture of the two. [...] We only needed to look at these children to know the whole story.²⁶

And then there are these "painfully thin women with sick children on the road" and beyond still, the many taken to Gabon for safety for a while."²⁷

Surviving Together

The writers describe, in a matter-of-fact way, a life revolving around air raids, "the clatter of gunfire and the boom of mortars."²⁸ As Igbokwe will later confirm,

Every day, families go out around 10am to 'take cover' because of the attack from 'enemy planes'. Persistent bombing usually signalled the approach of federal troops. The flight to the bush would start. Suitcases on their heads and

²³ Victor Nwankwo, *The Road to Udimma* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension, 1985). Tr. by R. Bowert & F.J. Stumann from German *Der Weg nach Udimma* (Bonn-Beuel: Afrika-Pressdienst, 1969): 107. The Nigerian pound was replaced with the present naira in 1973. The Biafran pound was in circulation from 1968 to 1970.

²⁴ Joe Igbokwe, *Igbos: Twenty-Five Years After Biafra* (Ikoyi: Advent Communications, 1995): 16.

²⁵ Ofoegbu, *Blow the Fire*, 66.

²⁶ Ofoegbu, *Blow the Fire*, 89.

²⁷ Ofoegbu, *Blow the Fire*, 117.

²⁸ Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, 366.

a mat and pots under their arms, the people would seek refuge in another part of the region. [...] Children were given out as servants. A few teenage girls were tacitly encouraged to go to the soldiers' camp for a few days and bring back food for the family. Some married women found themselves doing this just for survival.²⁹

All the while, in between raids, people still loved and married in defiance, yet many couples and families were threatened by difficulties and separation, or even destroyed by rape and brutal killings. Seven members of Ofoegbu's immediate family died in less than three years and she remembers: "no family escaped the hand of death."³⁰ The presence of death was potent and ominous, in the circling of planes and vultures, in the devastation experienced and retold in daily conversations. Death had become a topic for gossip, such as the story of the couple caught naked by an air raid. Achebe puts it in a more sombre way: "people are dying every day. As we talk now somebody is dying."³¹

The "strong relation" established by Acholonu "between nation-state, war (sexual) violence and gender" through her mapping of the strike-ridden and war-torn nation as a raped woman in the Biafra poems³² could easily be applied to "Girls At War." The "terrible transformation" that changed Gladys from a school girl into a prostitute is that of "a whole generation! The mothers of tomorrow" (19). It is the country's future that is at stake, and through the two characters, Achebe paints a dark political picture of the warring Biafra suffering from "war sickness" (111). This affects both its politicians – men who decided to go to war and dragged their families and people into it – that are now responsible for the country's despair, moral decadence and death, and its young women,³³ deceived, abused and betrayed, yet "conscious victims of circumstances" (120).

²⁹ Igbokwe, *Igbos: Twenty-Five Years After Biafra*, 16.

³⁰ Ofoegbu, *Blow the Fire*, 4.

³¹ Achebe, *Girls At War*, 112.

³² Ode S. Ogede, "Exile and the Female Imagination: The Nigerian Civil War, Western Ideology (Feminism) and the Poetry of Catherine Acholonu," *Neohelicon* 26.1 (January 1988): 133.

³³ The fact that Gladys represents Biafra is further hinted in a passing comment about her language – her unique way of "conveying with a few words or even a single word, whole layers of meaning" (113). This is a trait familiar to users of Igbo proverbs, equally present in the structure of personal names. Cf. Ugochukwu 2010: 205-227.

While, in Achebe's text, families and friends are kept in a blurred background, together with suffering crowds, Adichie and Ofoegbu place them at the forefront. Ofoegbu's husband, Len, never gets separated from the crowd – the family is embedded in it and their life and survival are inextricably intertwined with those of people around them. One of the striking features of *Blow the Fire* is the recurring use of the “we” in the story. Whereas Achebe deliberately extricated his two characters from the crowd and into the limelight in order to dissect their slow moral decay, Ofoegbu's analysis is more subtle and her style very different. Both authors' technique was influenced by their position at the time: Ofoegbu was just one of the many civilians on the run, having chosen to stay in Biafra; Achebe on the other hand, though an insider, benefited from an enlightened point of view as he participated in politics as one of Biafra's ambassadors. Both observe the situation from a very different angle.

Adichie's novel provides the wide-rimmed frame in which the two other books fit: foreigners, Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa characters, young and old, rich and poor, men, women, and children from all walks of life provide a great array of points of view on the conflict, further echoed by excerpts from the BBC and Radio Nigeria. Travellers carry stories and memories, and past events thus retold take on a new depth of meaning.

The Road, for Better or for Worse

The road, which often acted like the umbilical cord holding dismembered families together, also witnessed the making and unmaking of ephemeral, unstable relationships sustained by the fear of death and a craving for basic human needs – food, shelter, and reassurance. Displacement is at the heart of all texts whose pages tell of high ways and checkpoints, empty roads manned by nervous soldiers, badly maintained cars and “scores of pedestrians, dusty and exhausted, some military, some civil” fleeing from towns and villages, locked in “a tight, blockaded and desperate world.”³⁴ For the Ofoegbus and for Adichie's characters, it was first a return from the North, from Lagos or the mid-west; the exodus then took them to Azigbo, Awka, Aba, Umuahia, Ugiri, Ogbor, and other towns and villages, towards the constantly displaced centre of Biafra, with “refugees with no means of earning a living”³⁵ in search of an elusive, sheltered hide-out as the war progressed and the enclave shrank

³⁴ Achebe, *Girls At War*, 108, 106.

³⁵ Ofoegbu, *Blow the Fire*, 99.

further and further. Adichie recalls the crowded Kano–Enugu train, “a mass of loosely held metal, the ride unsteady” with the “sweaty pressure of bodies.”³⁶ Ofoegbu tells the story of penniless families crammed into tiny rooms without furniture, living on basics and cooking without salt, sugar or clean water; facing transport difficulties and without much hope, yet displaying courage and creativity. She recalls having to use public transport four times a week because, “for a long time, the couple had no transport of their own.”³⁷ This was to them “a real headache and foot-ache as (they) were out most days.”³⁸ Cars were not just a personal necessity: medical personnel needed one “to go for drugs or to our more distant clinics.”³⁹ Ofoegbu also tells of critical financial situations, air raids, taking cover, occasionally crossing paths with wounded or retreating soldiers and caring for air raid victims.

In *Girls At War*, the road is at the very centre of the text. It is on the road that Nwankwo meets Gladys. It is there, by the road side or in his car, that he chats with her, invites her home or takes her to the party. It is on the road, in his car, that she will meet her death during one of the air raids. The road, both the only escape route and an open grave, thus becomes a symbol of their passing existence, the epitome of a whole nation on the move, never able to settle anywhere. This is why cars, housing and shelters of all kinds were so important at the time: as “suddenly you realise that the only valid basis for existence is one that gives security to you and your people.”⁴⁰ In that disorganized and constant exodus, the possession of a car sets the privileged apart:

In the Biafran enclave, the ultimate symbol of privilege was a car; [...] the very few who had cars enjoyed the ultimate privilege – the privilege to quickly evacuate their families when their city was under siege [when] the majority of Biafrans [...] did not have cars or possessions.⁴¹

³⁶ Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, 148.

³⁷ Ofoegbu, *Blow the Fire*, 20.

³⁸ Ofoegbu, *Blow the Fire*, 15.

³⁹ Ofoegbu, *Blow the Fire*, 97.

⁴⁰ Achebe, in Neogy, “On Biafra: A Conversation with Chinua Achebe,” 224.

⁴¹ Nnaemeka, “Fighting on All Fronts,” 259.

The texts studied here may be voices of privilege, yet the commandeering of cars by soldiers⁴² and the charred remains of burnt down vehicles, were a constant reminder that, as the Nigerian saying goes, “no condition is permanent.”⁴³

All three texts present the war as a leveller, shrouding people into anonymity as families, both rich and poor, got scattered on the roads. Authors follow the struggles of a few named individuals, with shapeless, nameless, “scarecrow [crowds] of rags and floating ribs”⁴⁴ in the background. Even the family of Achebe’s main character, Nwankwo, remains anonymous: “he had a wife and four children living in the remote village of Ogbu and completely dependent on what relief he could find and send them” (107). The narrowing of existence space and breakdown of village solidarities is acknowledged by all authors: “in such a situation, one could do nothing for crowds; at best one could try to be of some use to one’s immediate neighbours.”⁴⁵

A Fragmented Picture for Broken Lives

The texts studied give a fragmented picture of the war, with a blurred vision of time and space that aptly translates the uncertainties of that time. They echo the enthusiasm of Biafra’s early days. “There was great rejoicing throughout the new State. The ordinary people had no idea of what this step was to entail. Thousands rushed to enlist in the Biafran forces.”⁴⁶ When one reads in *Girls At War* that “when their paths crossed a third time, at least eighteen months later, things had got very bad” (106), this does not describe primarily the political or military situation, even though some critics may believe and write that men usually focus more on such things. Even Achebe, who was in the know about the political situation and negotiations, evokes them only once, focusing instead on food shortage and starving populations. In the face of death and bombing, even heroism is far removed, “far below the eye-level of the people in this story – in out-of-the-way refugee camps, in the damp tatters, in the hungry and bare-handed courage of the first line of fire” (106). As for Ofoegbu, she starts her story with a brief recall of what the political scene was at the time – the Biafran declaration of independence, the

⁴² Ofoegbu, *Blow the Fire*, 38, and Achebe, *Girls At War*, 82.

⁴³ Frequently painted in bold letters on the back or sides of lorries in the 1970s.

⁴⁴ Achebe, *Girls At War*, 107.

⁴⁵ Achebe, *Girls At War*, 108.

⁴⁶ Ofoegbu, *Blow the Fire*, 19.

Nigerian proclamation of a state of emergency, and a few of the subsequent events, mentioning only key dates and a few political landmarks (federal edict and blockade, changing of currency, state of emergency, peace talks) insofar as they have a direct impact on people's lives.⁴⁷ For instance, the currency change implemented by Nigeria in 1968 results in Biafrans being locked up and unable to import any good, while faced with an internal financial crisis as the new Biafran currency is printed in Europe and brought in by arms planes,⁴⁸ causing a restricted circulation of money.

Nevertheless, as time goes by and the new nation is thrown into full-scale war, Ofoegbu seems to lose interest in national politics, immersing herself instead in her relief and humanitarian work and the day-to-day survival of her family, relying more on hearsay for scanty news of the war: "while the (evening) meal was cooking, all the news from the market was retold. This was the newspaper and local radio of the village."⁴⁹ Thus, in all the books, the progress of the conflict is measured, rather, by the increase in air raids, while international politics is reduced to peddled tales – "whenever our boys press them, they send an SOS to the Russians and Egyptians to bring the planes,"⁵⁰ and Ofoegbu recalls palm-wine drinkers reporting "that the man sitting quietly in the corner [of the bar] was Ojukwu himself, out to see what the people were thinking."⁵¹

Nnaemeka, studying another war text, Njoku's *Withstanding the Storm*, accuses the author of repetitiousness and criticizes her diary as a "pedestrian incursion into trivia," "more of an autobiography, borne out of a longing to give [her] children the true story," that "[fails] to see the relationship between her personal drama and the unfolding of a larger collective drama."⁵² Such a criticism fails to appreciate the fact that, far removed from the grasp of politics, such "trivia" were indeed what gave meaning to life in the war zone. The loss of daily routines, work deadlines, and home duties in the continuous exodus leads the texts to magnify tiny details and ordinary objects, amenities previously taken for granted like water or uneventful moments like meal-times, the buying of a pair of curtains or the comfort of a cup of tea, that, in a

⁴⁷ Adichie also alludes to these events occasionally in the first part of her novel.

⁴⁸ Ofoegbu, *Blow the Fire*, 32.

⁴⁹ Ofoegbu, *Blow the Fire*, 35.

⁵⁰ Achebe, *Girls At War*, 113.

⁵¹ Ofoegbu, *Blow the Fire*, 26.

⁵² Nnaemeka, "Fighting on All Fronts," 251.

secluded and unstable, ephemeral environment, occupies a disproportionate place, reflected page after page of detailed descriptions, or in the dramatic split of a young couple over a few sugar cubes in “Sugar Baby.” Food-purchasing and preparation, in particular, take centre-stage in this women’s starving landscape. “A woman fried akara balls every morning, for sale, next to the church and we usually bought a shilling’s worth for breakfast”; twelve lines of recipe and explanations follow on how, “for a maximum expenditure of one and six pence, we were able to have a fairly well balanced breakfast.”⁵³ Yet this is a highly organized society, trying to keep a sort of reassuring routine, busying oneself with details to try and forget a threatening reality, like Gladys meticulously searching car boots at the checkpoint. Apart from showing their characters’ efforts to retain or recreate daily routines in the midst of a disrupted and chaotic life, all three authors highlight Biafrans’ determination to keep track of the time as they try and adjust to the change of pace, from the excitement of the first days to the slow deterioration of daily life.

Igbo men – working, making ends meet, or warring – are often absent from this new, women-led society, and the texts reveal the key role played by the few expatriates still on the ground, as refugees rely on them more and more for help and support: relief pilots, charity workers, journalists, priests, and nuns running hospitals and orphanages, foreign pilots bringing in relief and ammunitions. Whereas Achebe and Adichie feature only a few Europeans who, though essential to the communal survival, are given a peripheral role in the story, Ofoegbu offers a more detailed account of expatriate missionaries’ work.

The books provide a glimpse of the passing of years and the descent into chaos, here again in fragmented snapshots: people by the roadside, starving, sick, yet unable to buy medicines; inflation with no one to borrow from; feeding centres and make-shift hospitals, petrol rationing, planes bringing arms and relief food. “There was an atmosphere I will never forget,” writes Ofoegbu: “a mixture of fear and faith.”⁵⁴ 1969–70 heralds more air raids victims, recurrent blackouts, wounded soldiers, ’flu, tuberculosis, hepatitis epidemics, kwashiorkor, and death without coffins – “if there was money for a coffin it would have been spent on food.”⁵⁵ Above all, it is “a pitched battle

⁵³ Ofoegbu, *Blow the Fire*, 14.

⁵⁴ Ofoegbu, *Blow the Fire*, 55.

⁵⁵ Ofoegbu, *Blow the Fire*, 98.

for the health of over two hundred children” and a story of resilience: “life had to continue.”⁵⁶ All three books present an eerie mix of poverty, uncertainty, and the rags of a former, wealthier life-style: the launching of new businesses, some cars on the road, radio and TV programmes, weddings, parties, and a futile struggle to maintain the appearance of some sort of normalcy; Christmas Eve brought bouts of heavy shelling while “the whole population seemed to be on the move.”⁵⁷ Then, suddenly, the war is over, and Achebe records the story of an ordinary family man who moved back to Enugu “with his overjoyed family carrying five heads on their shoulders,”⁵⁸ while Ofoegbu remembers: “I met a Yoruba soldier [...] who said he had not removed his boots for two months. His toes were deeply cut. [...] I gave him penicillin.”⁵⁹

While Achebe’s choice of the short-story genre expresses the dismantling effects of the war, the title *Half of a Yellow Sun* already evokes a fragmented picture. The unusual structure of Adichie’s novel takes readers a step further, beyond dusty rooms and temporary shelters cluttered with “cooking pots, sleeping mats, metal boxes, and bamboo beds [...], a home for disparate groups of people with nowhere else to go,”⁶⁰ with parts I and III set in the early-1960s while parts II and IV relive the late-1960s, their growing despair and suffering. Woven through this patchwork, the tiny, scattered fragments of a book yet unpublished, authored by one of the characters, give an international dimension to the conflict; Richard, the young British lecturer caught up in the war while at UNN, has titled his book: “The World Was Silent When we Died.”⁶¹

Conclusion

In Achebe’s “Girls At War,” Nwankwo and Gladys, even though inspired by real people and given a real personality, are set as representatives of their gender, and the whole collection can therefore be seen as a key to the reading of other war productions, as its main characters epitomize the war-torn Biafra and its struggles against poverty and annihilation, addiction and moral

⁵⁶ Ofoegbu, *Blow the Fire*, 109, 96.

⁵⁷ Ofoegbu, *Blow the Fire*, 137.

⁵⁸ Achebe, “Civil Peace,” in *Girls At War*, 84.

⁵⁹ Ofoegbu, *Blow the Fire*, 151.

⁶⁰ Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, 289.

⁶¹ Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, 82.

disintegration. Ofoegbu's text on the other hand paints a fresco that provides the background to Nwankwo and Gladys's existence and illustrates those struggles, with individuals now embedded in the crowd as she recalls the same period of suffering.

Ten years after, Ofoegbu justified the publication of her book by insisting on the pressing need to offer readers something different from soldiers' and politicians' accounts published so far: "The political and military sides of the war have been written about quite extensively so I intend to deal only with the events which had a direct effect on our lives as a family."⁶² For her, the war is certainly not the dry and cold report that politicians and high-ranking military officers had presented so far, but rather the simple story of families reduced to basics by circumstances beyond their control and often beyond their understanding, a trauma that needed to be told and shared so that, in the words of another title, it would "never again" recur. It was in any case an invaluable lesson on life, that needed to be passed on – "We felt that this was part of [the children's] heritage."⁶³ Since then, "some of the most powerful aspects of Igbo culture and demography [have been] reinforced through the production and circulation of collective memories of Biafra."⁶⁴

In his 1968 interview, Achebe, pressed to explain what the new nation's struggle entailed, expressed how difficult it was "to put it over in words."⁶⁵ The three texts considered here content themselves with narrating, uncovering the crumbs of ordinary lives in the throes of a war that, for many an ordinary citizen, had lost part of its meaning. Reflecting on those years, the narrator of "Sugar Baby" remarks:

I didn't want to tell any of the real stories Cletus was urging. And fortunately too Umera and his friend were bursting to tell more and more of their own hardship stories; for most of us had become in those days like a bunch of old hypochondriac women vying to recount the most lurid details of their own special infirmities. And I found it all painfully, unbearably, pathetic. (91)

Since then, writers have struggled to put their traumatized memories, feelings and thoughts into words in many ways, using the whole array of literary

⁶² Ofoegbu, *Blow the Fire*, 4.

⁶³ Ofoegbu, *Blow the Fire*, 1.

⁶⁴ Daniel Jordan Smith, "Legacies of Biafra: Marriage, 'Home People' and Reproduction Among the Igbo of Nigeria," *Africa* 75.1 (2005): 30.

⁶⁵ Achebe, in Neogy, "On Biafra. A Conversation with Chinua Achebe," 224.

genres and often opting for descriptive or metaphoric modes that recreate a life bereft of direction. “In a sense, most of the books written by Nigerians involved in the war could be classified as witness literature.”⁶⁶ Judging by the steady stream of publications on the subject, writers still seem to have much to say. For Eddie Iroh, “to stop writing about [the war] would be to stop writing about the history of this nation. You can never write enough about that tragic thing called war.”⁶⁷ As Biafra rejoined Nigeria, Ofoegbu testified that “many of [their] friends were eager to know”;⁶⁸ today, while the Biafra political dream remains very much alive,⁶⁹ new novels express their authors’ unease and fears that war lessons might not have been learnt yet. This explains why *Half of a Yellow Sun* can end with the words “May we always remember.”

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⁶⁶ Willfried Feuser, “Anomy and Beyond: Nigeria’s Civil War in Literature,” *Présence Africaine* 137–138 (1986): 121.

⁶⁷ Quoted in Feuser, “Anomy and Beyond,” 150.

⁶⁸ Ofoegbu, *Blow the Fire*, 1.

⁶⁹ Cf. Igbo websites and the September 2005 Igbo wave of protests in Nigeria, <http://www.biafraland.com/MASSOBProtestsSept0705.htm>

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