

Plaited Hair in a Calabash – Adichie on the Biafran Landscape

Abstract

Born seven years after the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie comes from a family that experienced the conflict first hand. In her remarkable second novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), Adichie relives the war: news of Igbo massacres and horror stories told by haggard eye-witnesses who escaped from the north; the flight from the university town of Nsukka just before the first battles; groups and individuals on the move on crowded roads; lovers torn apart by a conflict that divided the country; fears over children's health as food scarcity hit the eastern region; daily bombardments and the ominous presence of death, its inevitability and horror; a life reduced to an hour by hour survival, without any future in sight. Death is at the very centre of this novel clearly haunted by parents' and relatives' memories of the northern massacres of 1966, massacres whose graphic descriptions and distressing details echo through the pages and are branded into its fabric.. The book may have taken many liberties with history, yes, yet its fictitious aspects, including characterization aptly and vividly evoke the atmosphere of fear and despair of the time.

Key words: Adichie – Nigeria – Biafra - Literature

Born seven years after the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie comes from a family that experienced the conflict first hand. Both her grandfathers died during those years. Her parents told her many stories about the civil war, insisting that what mattered most was not what they went through, but the fact that they survived. Two of her uncles fought on the Biafran side, and one of them was wounded. An older cousin also shared his childhood memories with her. In her remarkable second novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun*¹ (2006), based on her family's invaluable contribution in sharing their memories of life in Biafra and haunted by the northern massacres of 1966² whose graphic descriptions and distressing memories are branded into the fabric of the novel, Adichie relives her family's experiences of the Biafra war.

The search for security

The novel, based on eye-witness accounts and “imaginative truths”³, takes readers through the survival story of a young Igbo couple, their adopted baby daughter and dedicated houseboy. The main characters had studied abroad, lived in Lagos, visited their family in Kano and settled in Nsukka. The novel opens on the road, with the young Ugwu from nearby Opi crossing the gate of the University of Nigeria⁴ with his aunt and making his way to the quarters of the lecturer he is going to serve as a houseboy. His move into the unknown mirrors the one soon to be experienced by

¹ This was the emblem of Biafra: a yellow sun which just started rising from the horizon, yet half hidden from sight (Biafra's national anthem hailed the country as ‘the land of the rising sun’).

² Osaghae 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.”

³ As told by Adichie in her ‘Author's note’ at the end of the novel.

⁴ University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN), the first university opened after independence, founded in 1960 and called University of Biafra during the war.

other characters. The twins Olanna and Kainene live in Lagos with their parents. Dr. Odenigbo lectures in Mathematics at the University of Nigeria and Richard Churchill works as a journalist in Britain. These various individuals will gradually come together, brought closer by the forces at play just before the war. Richard leaves England for Lagos, after having seen in a museum one of the artefacts brought back by archaeologists from Igbo-Ukwu⁵ - a beautiful roped pot. Kainene decides to move to Port-Harcourt to manage one of her father's factories. Her sister, Olanna, tired of her artificial and mundane Lagos life, meets Odenigbo, befriends him, decides to apply for a lecturing post at Nsukka and gets it. As all these characters get together, they also leave old friends behind. Richard breaks away from his British partner, Susan, and Olanna leaves her Hausa boyfriend, Mohammed.

Nsukka, this safe, tucked-away campus – the only one established in the country in a rural setting where “life was insular” (p.133), will be the first stop on the characters' journey. There, they join the University community, students and staff from all corners of the country, not to mention expatriates.⁶ Richard, now on a scholarship, spends his weekends on the coast in Port-Harcourt with Kainene. Olanna moves in with Odenigbo. Routine sets in and, for a while, life goes on, studious and peaceful, revolving around the evening meals at Odenigbo's house. This friendly circle, bringing together Igbos and Yorubas, and centred on intellectual debates, will

⁵ The archaeological excavations of Igbo-Ukwu, 40km south-east from Onitsha in Anambra State of Onitsha in Anambra State, followed the discovery of a number of pots by Isaiah Anozie, a villager, in 1938 ; Shaw's excavations, in 1959-1960, led to more findings. The news attracted a lot of attention at the time, because these findings revealed an art that was very different and far older than that of Ife; the findings of Igbo-Ukwu proved to be several centuries older than those of Ife. Cf. T.Shaw, *Unearthing Igbo-Ukwu : Account of archaeological discoveries in Eastern Nigeria*, London, Faber & Faber 1970, vol.I & II 888p.; E.Isichie, *A History of the Igbo People*, London, Macmillan 1976 pp.10-16 ; M.A. Onwuejeogwu, *An Igbo Civilization : Nri Kingdom & Hegemony*, London, Ethnographica/Benin-City, Ethiope 1981 p.164

⁶ During the first few years of the University of Nigeria, the academic staff from the Faculty of Sciences counted a certain number of scholars from the Middle East.

gradually evolve as the war sets in. These friendships will prove invaluable when massacres, air raids and constant displacement separate individuals and threaten relationships. Olanna and Kainene's uncle, aunt and pregnant daughter will be butchered during the 1966 Kano riots. The twins' wealthy parents will escape to London. Odenigbo's mother, who refused to leave her village, will get killed by Nigerian troops. Ugwu will live away from his family for three years, and Richard, who decided to stay in Biafra, will be left without any news from his friends back home.

The campus community gets all excited when Ojukwu visits the university. Then Biafra loses the university town in battle and the group has to leave the University of Nigeria Nsukka campus (UNN). On the road, they join "women with boxes on their heads and babies tied to their backs, barefoot children carrying bundles of clothes or yams or boxes, men dragging bicycles" (179). Their first port of call is the ancestral village. Ugwu dreams "he was back there now, in his mother's hut, under the dim coolness of the thatch roof" (4). He "wished that [his sister] Anulika were here, as well as the little children and the gossiping wives of his *umunna*⁷" (92). But this refuge proved to be of little comfort: Odenigbo and Olanna will be unable to stay at Abba⁸ and their mother's obstinacy will be fatal.

In this unstable landscape, the surest refuge is found in interpersonal relationships, as these are not bound to any place, and provide ready and compassionate listeners. These relationships are symbolised by the intimate touch of the hairdresser, patiently plaiting hair in the market and in courtyards. Women always need one another to plait

⁷ The extended family.

⁸ Ancestral village of the Adichie family, in Anambra State.

their hair – even Baby⁹ with “her plaits [...] tightened in a curly kink” (153) - and hairdo holds a special place, both in women’s daily lives and in Adichie’s novel. Olanna had “her hair newly plaited with black thread” (61) by her aunty; Kainene wore a wig – it was in fashion in those days – but, whenever she took it off, her short hair, plaited close to the skull, made her look like a young girl.

Throughout the war, Richard kept only two photos with him: those of Kainene, and of the roped pot,¹⁰ which played a central role in his life. He explains: “I fell in love with Igbo-Ukwu art and then fell in love with her” (310). The young Brit is fascinated by “the southeast, in the land of Igbo-Ukwu art, the land of the magnificent roped pot. That, after all, was why he had come to Nigeria” (56). He had seen a picture of the pot in *Colonies Magazine*: “the roped pot stood out immediately; he ran a finger over the picture and ached to touch the delicately cast metal itself.¹¹ [...] How deeply stirred he had been by the pot” (62). He wanted to see the place where this pot had been found. He visited Igbo-Ukwu on his way to Nsukka and decided to give the pot the pride of place in the book he was planning to write.¹² His relationship with Kainene only increased his interest in the pot and its aesthetic qualities, and this in turn triggered a deep passion for the embattled, young Biafra and a desire to belong to this community whose tastes he had come to share.

⁹ In pidgin, ‘baby’ is a generic name given to all baby girls before the traditional naming ceremony. In the novel, Odenigbo’s daughter will keep that baby name.

¹⁰ This bronze pot, dated from 850 BC, is the most prized object discovered by Isaiah Anozie in Igbo-Ukwu in 1938. These pots were probably musical instruments destined to rituals linked to Nri traditional religion and the Ozo title. For more details, read R.G. Armstrong, ‘A possible function for the bronze roped pot of Igbo-Ukwu’, *West African Journal of Archaeology* 4, 1974: 177-178 and M.A. Onwuejeogwu, *An Igbo Civilization: Nri Kingdom & Hegemony*, London, Ethnographica/Benin-City, Ethiopia 1981: 164.

¹¹ Cf. Isichei (1976:12): “an astonishing level of technical virtuosity, and a delight in intricate craftsmanship for its own sake.”

¹² This same roped pot is mentioned several times in the novel.

The womb and the calabash

Richard did not really like England; he grew up a lonely orphan, loathing “the food of his childhood, the sharp-tasting kippers full of bones, the porridge with the appalling thick skin on top like a waterproof lining” (73). Now, he enjoyed Odenigbo’s evening meals and friendly get-togethers, the “smoky spiciness” (104) of the *suya*¹³ and Ugwu’s pepper soup, its oily broth, “the hot spices wafted up [that] tickled his nose, and the pieces of meat and tripe [that] floated from side to side” (90). The presence of the cooking pot, which once brought Nigerian lecturers together, will later speak of the coming together of all those displaced by the war. This ordinary object, round and warm, the symbol of family life, stays at the centre of people’s worries as everything around them gives way. Selected as one of the essentials at the moment Olanna and Odenigbo ran away from UNN and carefully placed, still warm, in the boot of the car, it will remain the focus of Olanna’s attention throughout the war as she struggles to feed her family.

The roundness of the pot evokes another image, that of the belly. The war and its dangers, the prospect of an uncertain future, trigger a shift in people’s priorities. Next to the need for food now comes that of securing their lineage. This, although not surprising, given the premium placed on male children in Igboland – “to have a baby boy first” (119) – is now powered by the need to ensure one’s survival through children. Richard was told that his birth had been an accident: his parents “stared at each other when they talked, forgot his birthdays. [...] They had not planned to have him and, because of that, they had raised him as an afterthought” (115). The

¹³ Spicy brochette, cooked in ashes.

community he joined could not be more different: they craved for children, made them, cared for them, loved them to bits and lamented over their often untimely death. Love-making, pregnancy and the care of children take an important place in the novel, where children are seen as insurance for the future, and the way to survive beyond death. Olanna is at the centre of this desired maternity:

The thought came to her slowly: she wanted to have Odenigbo's child. They had never really discussed children. She once told him that she did not have that fabled female longing to give birth, and her mother had called her abnormal. [...] The longing in the lower part of her belly was sudden and searing and new. She wanted the solid weight of a child, his child, in her body (104).

Later on, Odenigbo suggests: "let us have a child" (106); they will eventually live this fecundity with his own baby girl, from a young villager brought by his mother.

The pot, the belly, the child – Adichie summarises these three key images in what can be considered as the icon of her novel, namely, the calabash on the lap of the refugee woman on the train travelling back from the north.

Olanna was thrown against the woman next to her, against something on the woman's lap, a big bowl, a calabash. The woman's wrapper was dotted with splotchy stains that looked like blood [...]. The woman with the calabash nudged her, then motioned to some other people close by.

'*Bianu*, come', she said. 'Come and take a look'.

She opened the calabash.

‘Take a look’, she said again.

Olanna looked into the bowl. She saw the girl’s head with the ashy-grey skin and the plaited hair and rolled-back eyes and open mouth. She stared at it for a while before she looked away. Somebody screamed.

The woman closed the calabash. ‘Do you know,’ she said, ‘it took me so long to plait this hair? She had such thick hair.’

The train had stopped with a rusty screech. Olanna got down and stood in the jostling crowd. [...] She thought about the plaited hair resting in the calabash. She visualised the mother plaiting it, her fingers oiling it with pomade before dividing it into sections with a wooden comb (149).

This silent picture ripples through the pages (82-149-156-318-347-409-410) as

Olanna, the main character, remembers her gazing into the bowl.¹⁴

¹⁴ A look at those texts helps to understand the depth of the trauma she suffered and the way it affected her:

- “He recounts the story of the woman with the calabash. She sat on the floor of a train [...] She was silent, caressing the covered calabash on her lap in a gentle rhythm until they crossed the Niger, and then she lifted the lid and asked Olanna and others close by to look inside. [...] She tells him how the bloodstains on the woman’s wrapper blended into the fabric to form a rusty mauve. She describes the carved designs on the woman’s calabash, slanting lines crisscrossing each other, and she describes 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)
 - “Olanna told Odenigbo what she had seen. She described the vaguely familiar clothes on the headless bodies in the yard, the still-twitchy fingers on Uncle Mbaezi’s hand, the rolled-back eyes of the child’s head in the calabash and the odd skin tone – a flat, sallow grey, like a poorly wiped backboard – of all the corpses that lay in the yard.” (156)
 - “You know Olanna saw a mother carrying her child’s head, Kainene said.” (318)
 - Kainene to Olanna: “do you ever dream of that child’s head in the calabash? She asked. Olanna looked out of the window and remembered the slanting lines crisscrossing the calabash, the white blankness of the child’s eyes. ‘I don’t remember my dreams.’” (347)
 - “Olanna placed the comb down. ‘I keep thinking about the hair on that child’s head I saw on the train; it was very thick. It must have been work for her mother to plait it.’
 - How was it plaited? Ugwu asked.
- Olanna was surprised, at first, by the question and then she realised that she clearly remembered how it was plaited and she began to describe the hairstyle, how some of the braids fell across the forehead. Then she described the head itself, the open eyes, the greying skin [...] and so she told him all she remembered about the train full of people who had cried and shouted and urinated on themselves.” (409-410)

As the excerpts gradually zoom in on the child's head, the reader gets a glimpse of the horror of wars through a close-up of a mother holding in her lap the calabash that has become her child's body and struggling to keep her daughter alive beyond the physical reality of death. The novel then turns to witnesses and Olanna attempting to describe what she saw. First, the calabash, then the head with its abundant hair, so thick, so lively, then the eyes, wide-open, and the child's mouth – a blurred, greyish picture. One memory leads to the next, and the words reveal Olanna's trauma, then her struggle to cope by telling it out, before trying to wipe the picture off her memory by denying what still haunts her, and refusing to relive her nightmare. She eventually engages in the grieving process, accepts her scars and turns to talking again, helped in this by Ugwu's sympathetic listening and questions. Sharing this crucial moment also allows Olanna to put the child's death in context and link that senseless killing to those that preceded and followed. The Pieta from the train now evokes "the German women who fled Hamburg with the charred bodies of their children stuffed in suitcases, the Rwandan women who pocketed tiny parts of their mauled babies" (82).

Ripples of pain

Adichie's novel, which identifies with refugees and follows them to 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" (289), communes deeply with this deliquescent world through body sensations: "the umbrella tree fruit [...] had fallen during the previous night and lay, oval and pale yellow, on the lawn. Richard often smelt the over-sweetness of their rotting, a scent he knew he would always associate with living in Nsukka" (73). The style is

powerfully sensual, and evokes a daily life in the sun, rocking with words and songs, torn by wailing and filled with silence. Characters are primarily guided by touch (hands on the calabash, objects and bodies) and their body language says it all, with their eyes taking in the world, its colours, shapes and movement. The novel is built on correspondences introduced by the blurring of colours and the superimposition of images, with the red of the blood-spattered wrapper triggering the memory of the kitchen bowls soiled with ragout and that of the traces of lipstick on drinking glasses (p.83). And while cooking is close to sex and death, the appearance of stuffed garden eggs brings in an anecdote about that African woman disembowelled and stuffed by Europeans before being exhibited “all over Europe” (108). A web of correspondences is thus weaved around powerful images knotted around the plot like cords around the Igbo-Ukwu pot and whose regular recurrence reinforces the horror tale. At the centre, holding everything together, the terrible opening and closing of the round calabash, keeps memories alive as it constantly recalls the massacres that transformed Nigerians into Biafrans and kept them together as the thickening of a soup.

The first correspondence is that linking the roped pot and the calabash, two containers which evoke both the hearth and the sanctuary, as in Dr. Okeoma’s poem, “something about placing clay pot on top of clay pot to form a ladder to the sky” to rise and grab the victory (411). The calabash itself symbolises both home and cooking pot, and the cooking pot brings man and wife together.¹⁵ Whereas the roped pot talks about Richard and Kainene, the calabash, that represents both massacres and Biafra, belongs to Olanna who told its story. Yet it also brings together the two couples while embodying others represented by Uncle Mbaezi and family.

¹⁵ The verb ‘eat’ is commonly used in Igbo as an adult slang to describe the sex act.

“They are killing us like ants” (144) laments a refugee. The second correspondence built into the novel is that between Igbos and animals, prepared by the placard brandished at the Nsukka meeting in 1967: “we cannot die like dogs” (162). It is further weaved into the text by the parable of the hen and the kite summarising the devastation wrought by Nigerian air raids:

She watched [...] a hen near the lemon tree, guarding six chicks, nudging them towards crumbs on the ground. [...] The hen began to squawk loudly and spread its wings to shield the chicks, but they did not run into the shelter quickly enough. A kite swooped down and carried one of them off, a brown-and-white chick. It was so fast, the descent of the kite and the gliding away with the chick grasped in hooked claws, that Olanna thought she might have imagined it. She couldn't have, though, because the hen was running around in circles, squawking, raising clouds of dust. The other chicks looked bewildered. Olanna watched them and wondered if they understood their mother's mourning dance. Then, finally, she started to cry. (224)

In their flight from the north, people “drove in a frenzied silence, past policemen in blood-splattered uniforms, past vultures perched by the roadside, past boys carrying looted radios” (148). As the war progressed, they then met refugees, “with their thin, naked children” (285). And, one of the first images that came to summarise the Biafran war in public opinion was that of a swollen-bellied child, a kwashiorkor victim. Adichie's novel denounces the war as a child killer and this massacre of the innocents recalls similar killings – those caused by the mass bombing of German

cities at the end of the second world war, those of Rwanda, (82) and those of the blacks lynched, hanged, stoned (229) or burnt to death in their churches (245) in the United States of America in the 1960s.

This novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, is just like the way to the Kano airport, littered with Igbo corpses (147): those of Igbo officers killed in the barracks, civilians “dumped outside the city walls” in Kano, “teachers hacked down in Zaria” (144), Uncle Mbaezi and his family – “hundred were killed in Zaria alone” (154). The wounded lie in hospital wards, “on mats, on mattresses, on the bare floor. There was so much blood everywhere” (393). The victims will all have to live with these pictures, these memories. In the midst of her love-making, Olanna “thought about Arize’s pregnant belly, how easily it must have broken, skin stretched that taut” (160) when it was ripped open. And Richard, just back from Kano, wondered if the massacres he witnessed¹⁶ really took place, “if he really had seen men die, if the lingering smells from shattered liquor bottles and bloodied human bodies were only in his

¹⁶ This episode of the novel is directly inspired from a *Times* article given a witness account of the events that took place on October 14, 1966: « In October of 1966, despite Gowon's declaration that the Ibo would be protected, pogroms and rioting resulted in the mutilation and death of thousands of Ibo and a mass flight to the Eastern Region by a million and a half Ibo. [...]

...A Lagos-bound jet had just arrived from London, and as the Kano passengers were escorted into the customs shed, a wild-eyed soldier stormed in, brandishing a rifle and demanding, 'Ina Nyammari?'-Hausa for 'Where are the damned Ibos?' There were Ibo among the customs officials, and they dropped their chalk and fled, only to be shot down in the main terminal by other soldiers. Screaming their bloody curses of a Moslem holy war, the Hausa troops turned the airport into a shambles, bayoneting Ibo workers in the bar, gunning them down in the corridors, and hauling Ibo passengers off the plane to be lined up and shot. From the airport the troops fanned out through downtown Kano, hunting down Ibos in bars, hotels and on the streets. One contingent drove their Land Rover to the rail road station where more than 100 Ibos were waiting for a train, and cut them down with automatic fire. The soldiers did not have to do all the killing. They were soon joined by thousands of Hausa civilians, who rampaged through the city armed with stones, cutlasses, machetes, and homemade weapons of metal and broken glass. Crying 'Heathen!' and 'Allah!!' the mobs and troops invaded the sabon gari (strangers' quarter), ransacking, looting and burning Ibo homes and stores and murdering their owners. ...All night long and into the morning the massacre went on. Then tired but fulfilled, the Hausas drifted back to their homes and barracks to get some breakfast and sleep. Municipal garbage trucks were sent out to collect the dead and dump them into mass graves outside the city.” (21) <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/1984/SMR.htm> p.21. This happened despite Gowon’s declaration that the Ibo would be protected.

imagination” (155). Yet “he had only to close his eyes to see the freshly dead bodies on the floor of the airport and to recall the pitch of screams” (165). Those screams, in turn, bring back visual memories, the stench of blood, and the traumatised survivor “wished that he would lose his mind, or that his memory would suppress itself, but instead everything took on a terrible transparency” (165).

Adichie describes in a matter-of-fact way a life on the run, the crowded Kano-Enugu train, “a mass of loosely held metal, the ride unsteady” with the “sweaty pressure of bodies” (148), a life hounded by the constant air raids, “the clatter of gunfire and the boom of mortars” (366). Here again, one finds, burnt into the page, one of those potent and terrible pictures that will keep tormenting Kainene: that of her servant beheaded before her eyes during an air raid while he ran, “his body arched slightly forwards, his arms flying around, his head bobbing” before he was hit. A second later, “the body was running, arched slightly forwards, arms flying around, but there was no head. There was only a bloodied neck” (317). A page later, Kainene narrates the nightmares which now haunt her: every morning, she woke up “and remembered his running headless body.” She will go on to describe Ikejide’s death to her sister with the same words: “they were bombing and shelling us, and a piece of shrapnel cut off his head, completely beheaded him, and his body kept running. His body kept running and it didn’t have a head” (344).

The longer the war lasts, the more the pictures crowding into memory, and the more damaging the traumas, while daily life tends to become a blur, a groping through the unknown, a constant fight for survival strengthened by a tenacious hope in a better future. Adichie says: “The blurred days crawled into one another. Olanna grasped for

thoughts, for things to do” (225). Faced with the unspeakable, some of Adichie’s characters tend to first try and forget what they saw, hence Olanna’s reluctance to speak about her trip to Kano or the nightmares that followed. Inatimi, a refugee from the coastal area, explains: “when I lost my whole family, every single one, it was as if I had been born all over again [...]. I was a new person because I no longer had family to remind me of what I had been” (319). Kainene opts to throw herself into humanitarian work that she sees as “the erasing of memory” (320), and accepts to help with the supplying of food to the refugee camp. Yet the smallest objects, a fragrance, a touch, a piece of cloth, details of a landscape, speedily bring back the past to memory. The rough cement wall used to remind Ugwu of the “mud walls of his mother’s hut that still bore the fresh patterns of moulding fingers. For a brief moment, he wished he were back there now” (4). In the same way, after Odenigbo installed a separating curtain in their new room, Olanna looks at “the sagging string [...] tied to nails on the wall, remembered Uncle Mbaezi and Aunty Ifeka’s room in Kano, and began to cry” (326). As erasing the immediate past proves too difficult, survivors and refugees resort to the recalling of the distant past in response to “the urge to stretch [their] hand into the past and reverse history” (245) – this may be one of the possible explanations to the structure adopted for the novel, with its regular movement between the early and the late sixties.

The ashes of history in the urn

Adichie’s novel is a journey through time, a chaotic trajectory which stretches over a space which shrinks as days go by. Its characters move between London, Lagos, Kano and Eastern Nigeria, weaving individual trajectories within a dislocated time frame,

oscillating between past, present and future. And although they seem to come back to base at last in January 1970 as they crawl back to Nsukka, time has gone by and life can never be the same. The resulting feeling is that of a tearing apart, a disjunction between time and space expressed in the malaise of people who thought they had reached home and do not recognise their surroundings any more. Odenigbo's bungalow has been soiled and ransacked, and he searches in vain for his books. The vegetation itself is overgrown and masks any resemblance with the earlier landscape. One by one, memories of old then slip into the calabash, the funeral urn which summarises the book.

The lid opens and readers are taken through a downward journey sign-posted by pictures. Introduced to Igboland through the Igbo-Ukwu's roped pot, they find it an invaluable treasure, which then takes them to the calabash containing the child's head whose open mouth, like the mask of an Aeschylean tragedy, hides the dirges that lament the northern massacres. That deafening silence then reveals bereaved families, orphaned lineages, and a war-torn land in a pool of dried blood. The outside of the pot and of the calabash only gave a glimpse of the beauty of the Promised Land. The round shape of the calabash promised those precious children - *Nwakaego*.¹⁷ That was why people screamed when the calabash was opened: the only treasure left to the refugee, the one that counted most in her culture, the child, was destroyed. The novel does not take time mourning over material losses, dilapidated buildings or traders' bankruptcy. It presents the war as a sterilisation exercise: Olanna will not conceive, Kainene vanishes without having the time to get pregnant, Arize's unborn child is destroyed – Baby is the only one to survive as peace comes just in time.

¹⁷ *Nwakaego*, first name for a girl, meaning “children are more valuable than riches”

The calabash is an object of memory: this container summarises the refugees' story and that of Biafra too, since secession was triggered by the northern pogroms. The same calabash can equally be seen as a place of remembrance, as it functions as a funeral urn, sheltering the ashes of the dead – a mobile burial ground. Biafra lost its land under constant attacks and the pounding of the mortars and this urn is all that is left, the symbol of all that is now destroyed – the child, the land, the hope of its people, the dreams of a united nation. The calabash also serves as a reminder of the people's history, as Olanna sat there, "thinking about how a single act could reverberate over time and space and leave stains that could never be washed off" (245). Adichie chose to identify with her family history, and she now, like the woman with the calabash, opens her novel to readers and invites them to see, to know and understand. *Half of a Yellow Sun* ends with the words: "may we always remember." The author's ultimate message is a call to join in the world's remembrance and the duty of peace.

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[SMR.htm](#)