

**‘Those Who Did Not Have A Voice’: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s Historical Novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) and its Identity as a Literary Monument and Counter-Monument**

The novels I love, the ones I remember, the ones I re-read, have an empathetic human quality, or “emotional truth”. This quality is difficult to define, but I always recognise it when I see it: it is different from honesty and more resilient than fact. [...] When I started my second novel *Half of a Yellow Sun*, set before and during the Nigeria Biafra War of 1967-1970, I hoped that emotional truth would be its major recognisable trait<sup>1</sup>

- Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

The Republic of Biafra was formed on the 30th May 1967. Its secession from Nigeria was led by a Military Officer, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, Biafra’s first president. Located in the south-eastern region of Nigeria, Biafra’s population consisted mostly of Igbo people alongside many other minority tribes<sup>2</sup>. The Republic’s formation was the result of ‘political and ethnic turmoil’<sup>3</sup> in a newly independent Nigeria, a turmoil caused by its recent decolonisation granted by England in 1960. However, Biafra’s ideological deliverance became instead, a gateway to the Nigerian Civil War. Biafra existed for roughly three years, falling on the 15th of January 1970, the day on which The Republic surrendered<sup>4</sup>. Like others of my millennial generation and Western upbringing, unfortunately, before this study I did not have any understanding of the Nigerian civil war, let alone

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<sup>1</sup> Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, ‘Truth and Lies’, *The Guardian* (2006) <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/sep/16/fiction.society>> [accessed 1 April 2019]

<sup>2</sup> Roderick McLeod, ‘Biafra at 50: Nigeria’s Civil War Explained’, *BBC* (2017) <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-africa-40507324/biafra-at-50-nigeria-s-civil-war-explained>> [accessed 26 March 2019]

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

Biafra. The conflict was first explained to me by Sadé, a woman of Nigerian, but more specifically Igbo heritage. Despite being connected through her father's lineage, initially, she knew little about the event as family members, like her grandmother, no longer wished to discuss what must have been a traumatic experience. In order to educate herself on her own history, Sadé instead turned to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's contemporary historical novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun* ((2006), henceforth *Yellow Sun*).

At the beginning of this essay, I purposefully transcribed facts presented by the BBC, understood as Biafra's history. This 'objective' history is often prioritised, however, as shown by Sadé's desire to seek a more comprehensive source of identity in fiction, not always representative. Although frequently placed in '[t]he sheer magnitude of literary works about the Nigerian Civil War'<sup>5</sup>, Adichie's identity as a contemporary, diasporic, woman writer generates for *Yellow Sun*, a unique perspective from which to write a version of history. Admittedly drawing from her predecessors, such as Chinua Achebe, Adichie writes against dominant histories on Africa narrated by the West. Similarly, through deploying 'emotional truth'<sup>6</sup>, Adichie documents war 'faithful to experience and memory rather than trying to meet certain theoretical requirements'<sup>7</sup>. However, unlike the writers of Achebe's generation, for whom the war 'was no symbol: it was bloodletting and starvation that was either ongoing, or still vivid in the mind's eye'<sup>8</sup>, Adichie and her contemporaries, are able 'through time and art'<sup>9</sup>, to effectively 'digest the poison of the past'<sup>10</sup>. Following Nigeria's independence, the boundaries constructed by British colonialists, repositioned 'clearly distinct peoples inhabiting the

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<sup>5</sup> Eleni Coundouriotis, 'Contesting the New Authenticity: Contemporary War Fiction in Africa', in *The People's Right to the Novel*, (New York: Fordham University, 2014), pp.220-259 (p.220).

<sup>6</sup> Adichie, 'Truth and Lies'.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> John C. Hawley, 'Biafra as Heritage and Symbol: Adichie, Mbachu, and Iweala', *Research in African Literatures*, 39 (2008), 15-26 (pp.16-17).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

parts of the Niger basin that became Nigeria in an unhealthy social, economic and political arrangement<sup>11</sup>, catalysing the horrors of the war. As a subject of diaspora, born in Nigeria yet presently living in America, Adichie experiences liminality, a position the internally displaced citizens of failed Biafra also found themselves. Adichie's writing of *Yellow Sun*, a 'domestic novel'<sup>12</sup>, engages with the canon of women documenting repressed, private histories. Through 'claiming a privileged relationship to the 'real'', feminist critics argue, 'historical narratives are thus claiming interpretive power in a world of discourse, a power, which [...] is indissolubly linked to the repression of difference in both language and culture and the positioning of the (masculine) subject as a universal source of meaning'<sup>13</sup>. Adichie is also widely known for *We Should All Be Feminists*, an essay based on her talk at TEDxEutston in 2012, 'a yearly conference focused on Africa'<sup>14</sup>. Satirically identifying as a 'Happy African Feminist Who Does Not Hate Men'<sup>15</sup>, Adichie rebukes criticisms that characterise feminism as 'un-African'<sup>16</sup>. Socially active, Adichie is clearly invested in globally challenging constructs: such as gender and nation, that define people in negative ways. *Yellow Sun's* subversive, non-linear historiography that focuses on the private lives of three diverse protagonists, calls into question the hegemony of history. *Yellow Sun* not only confronts how postwar-Nigeria 'has largely repressed public commemoration of the war'<sup>17</sup> but also how international audience's perceptions are 'shaped by a humanitarian ethos that sees Africa through the lens of "distant suffering"<sup>18</sup>. Through commemorating history within fiction, which 'by

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<sup>11</sup> E.C. Ejiogu, 'Chinua Achebe on Biafra: An Elaborate Deconstruction', *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 48 (2013), 653-670 (p.653).

<sup>12</sup> Coundouriotis, 'War Fiction in Africa', p.224.

<sup>13</sup> Linda Anderson, 'The Re-imagining of History in Contemporary Women's Fiction', in *Plotting Change: Contemporary Women's Fiction*, (UK: Edward Arnold, 1990) pp.129-141 (p.131).

<sup>14</sup> Chiamamda Ngozi Adichie, *We Should All Be Feminists* (London: 4th Estate, 2014), pp.3-10.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Eleni Coundouriotis, 'Toward a People's History: The Novels of the Nigerian Civil War', in *The People's Right to the Novel*, (New York: Fordham University, 2014), pp.98-151 (p.98).

<sup>18</sup> Coundouriotis, 'War Fiction in Africa', p. 220.

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its very nature, creates the possibility of a certain kind of radical honesty'<sup>19</sup>, *Yellow Sun* generates a version of history as if it were experienced by a diverse spectrum of Biafrans, rather than just the so-called heroes.

I now wish to incorporate the monument and counter-monument, the conclusive point of my argument. Across many recovering sites of conflict, such as countries once occupied by Nazi Germany, there has been a recent reform in the memorialisation of traumatic history. James E. Young, a central critic in monument theory, summarises these changes when stating that, 'there has been a metamorphosis of the monument from the heroic, self-aggrandising figurative icons of the late nineteenth century celebrating national ideals and triumphs to the antiheroic, often ironic, and self-effacing conceptual installations that mark the national ambivalence and uncertainty of late twentieth-century postmodernism'<sup>20</sup>. Placing a post-colonial, 'domestic novel'<sup>21</sup> within the confines of the historical novel genre; Adichie connects *Yellow Sun* and its countering, yet symbiotic dialogue between: fact and fiction, nationhood and the fallen nation of Biafra, public and private, history in conversation with history; with the dialogic between the monument and counter-monument. Through countering dominant narratives, and documenting 'those who did not have a voice'<sup>22</sup>, Adichie utilises her insight to transcend boundaries, materialising difference, 'the only universal in this world'<sup>23</sup>, as a marker of collective identity.

My argument is contended in three parts. To begin, I locate *Yellow Sun* within the literary landscape of the post-colonial women's historical novel. The second section is a close reading of *Yellow Sun's*

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<sup>19</sup> Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, 'Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: Facts are stranger than fiction', in *The Guardian* (2013) <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/apr/19/chimamanda-ngozi-adichie-stranger-fiction>> [accessed 28 March 2019]

<sup>20</sup> James E Young, 'Memory, Countermemory and the End of the Monument', in *At Memory's Edge* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2000), pp.90-119 (p.93).

<sup>21</sup> Coundouriotis, 'War Fiction in Africa', p.224.

<sup>22</sup> Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun* (London: 4th Estate, 2006), p.250. Further references will be noted in brackets in the body of the essay.

<sup>23</sup> Emma Brockes, 'Interview, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: 'Can people please stop telling me feminism is hot?''', *The Guardian* (2017) <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/mar/04/chimamanda-ngozi-adichie-stop-telling-me-feminism-hot>> [accessed 23 March 2019]

two central rape cases, an offence symbolic of the oppression of women, focusing on the importance of Adichie's perspective. Finally, I compare *Yellow Sun* to the monument and counter-monument, drawing together the component parts of my essay to consider the objective, monumental status of the text.

### **Locating *Half of a Yellow Sun***

I now begin locating *Yellow Sun* in the landscape of the post-colonial women's historical novel. Traditionally, the historical novel genre is inextricably linked to nationalism. In *The Historical Novel* (1962), a text outlining the genre's traditions, Georg Lukács states '[t]he appeal to national independence and national character is necessarily connected with a re-awakening of national history with memories of the past, of past greatness, of moments of national dishonour, whether this results in a progressive or reactionary ideology'<sup>24</sup>. Through replacing 'past greatness'<sup>25</sup> with 'emotional truth'<sup>26</sup>, Adichie rebukes nationalist ideologies and instead locates Biafra's collective identity in human difference. Aware of the white, Western, 'league of educated middle-class men usually associated with writing history'<sup>27</sup> and the historical novel; Adichie determinedly addresses the intersectionality she faces as a black, diasporic, middle-class, woman author approaching the genre. In *Yellow Sun*, through revealing the Nigerian village-boy, Ugwu as the author of the 'metafictional element'<sup>28</sup> entitled 'The Book: The World Was Silent When We Died' (p.82), Adichie

<sup>24</sup> Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. by Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (Nebraska: The University of Nebraska Press, 1983), p.25.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Adichie, 'Truth and Lies'.

<sup>27</sup> Emmanuel Mzomera Ngwira, 'He Writes About the World that Remained Silent': Witnessing Authorship in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*', *English Studies in Africa*, 55:2 (2012), 43-53 (p.43).

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

counters traditional historiography, rethinking ‘the epistemological power of the Western subject over the African story’<sup>29</sup>. ‘The Book’ occurs in the text eight times, punctuating the end of chapters, six belonging to the British writer Richard and two to Ugwu. Much of the criticism on *Yellow Sun* has focused upon the reader’s assumption, that Richard must be the unnamed author<sup>30</sup>. Yet whilst academics critique the reader for not considering Ugwu, the male gender assigned to the author, and subsequent repression of the female voice, is rarely, if at all, commented on.

Syntactically mapping the power structures in *his* role as author, ‘The Book’ begins ‘[f]or the prologue, he recounts the story of the woman with the calabash’(p.82). Instantly aware of the author’s male gender, the reader ‘observes the writer listening to other people’s experiences’<sup>31</sup>, and is transported to the moment of writing through the ‘third person and present tense’<sup>32</sup>. Ugwu’s authorial identity gestures toward the breadth of Nigerian male writers that documented the war, the renown names of Cyprian Ekwensi, Ben Orki and Chinua Achebe. In ‘The Book’, the immediacy of the tense when coupled with Ugwu’s subversive authorial power, places these African writers as important literary and revolutionary figures in the context of the 1960s. Despite the significant lack of female authors, Flora Nwapa being one of few, African male writers were still of major progressive importance. Challenging the Western voice that dominated writing on Africa, Chinua Achebe’s ‘image of Africa — even if incomplete — is an essential part not only of establishing the typical, but also of opening it up to a more nuanced picture of the typically African’<sup>33</sup>. Adichie’s epigraph, extracted from Achebe’s *Christmas in Biafra and Other Poems*, structurally prefigures Achebe, arranging Adichie and *Yellow Sun* as direct successors. Ruth S. Wenske determines this

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Maya Ganapathy, ‘Sidestepping the Political “Graveyard of Creativity”’: Polyphonic Narratives and Reenvisioning the Nation-State in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun*’, *Research in African Literatures*, 47 (2016), 88-105 (p.95).

<sup>31</sup> Ngwira, pp.48-49.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Ruth S Wenske, ‘Adichie in Dialogue with Achebe: Balancing Dualities in *Half of a Yellow Sun*’, *Research in African Literatures*, 47 (2016), 70-87 (pp.70-75).

‘inevitable link’<sup>34</sup> between the two authors, as one ‘which may have once been described in terms of their tribe and style of fiction, can now safely be recognised in terms of their success and centrality within African literature’<sup>35</sup>. Although Adichie, Achebe and other Nigerian writers, can be linked in the ‘sense of being the inheritor of a certain people’s *story*’<sup>36</sup>, it is important to not apply unfounded national or even tribal grouping due to the colonial implications such geographical and cultural bracketing evokes. As argued by John Frow in *Genre*, ‘[t]he patterns of genre, that is to say, are at once shaped by a type of situation and in turn shape the rhetorical actions that are performed in response to it’<sup>37</sup>. In this way, I wish to connect *Yellow Sun* to post-colonial literature by the fact that, as *Yellow Sun*’s Miss Adebayo terms it, ‘we all have white oppression in common’(p.20), whilst Adichie, as a female author, connects to the women’s historical novel through a shared understanding of patriarchal oppression. United in historiographic aims, *Yellow Sun* engages with both intersections to centre marginalised and private histories.

In ‘The Book’, through recounting ‘the woman with the calabash’(p.82) as told to him by Olanna, the historian and author Ugwu focalises female experience through the lens of male understanding. Emmanuel Mzomera Ngwira highlights that, ‘power relations produce the knowing subject *versus* the passive object binary, with the former having the epistemological power over the latter’<sup>38</sup>. ‘The Book’ subverts the colonising binary between Western subject and African object, empowering the knowing African male subject. However, this is at the expense of the African female, who becomes the epistemological object. Through paralleling the traditional historiographic events recorded in

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Caroline Rody, *The Daughter’s Return* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p.3.

<sup>37</sup> John Frow, *Genre* (New York: Routledge, 2015), p.15.

<sup>38</sup> Emmanuel Mzomera Ngwira, ‘“He Writes About the World that Remained Silent”: Witnessing Authorship in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun*’, *English Studies in Africa*, 55:2 (2012), 43-53 (p.44).

Ugwu's 'The Book' and the 'emotional truth'<sup>39</sup> expressed in the text; Adichie highlights the disparities between historical narratives, their hegemonic agency in their singularity as '*The Book*'; in comparison to human experience. Realigning this bias, feminist historical analysis 'calls us to look beyond the public and male experiences of trauma to the private, secret experiences that women encounter in the interpersonal realm'<sup>40</sup>. Ugwu's failure to document the private traumas inflicted upon characters, in particular female characters, demonstrates how these experiences have been elided from 'objective' history. For example, although recounting the calabash scene, Ugwu does not document Olanna's psychological trauma, her 'Dark Swoops'(p.156); similarly, Ugwu's participation in a gang rape is not recorded.

In the main body, *Yellow Sun*'s 'focus on the private and domestic rather than the public, national, or military spheres'<sup>41</sup>, shown most explicitly in the documentation of rape, locates it within women's history writing. For example, the English writer, Pat Barker in *The Silence Of The Girls* (2018), a feminist re-writing of *The Iliad*; problematises the centralisation of the infamous war in history whilst the occurrence of wartime rape has been silenced. Similarly, through documenting private histories, such as rape in *Yellow Sun*, Adichie engages with this feminist rewriting of history. However, as a post-colonial woman, Adichie along with many others must comprehend the patriarchy intersected by their experience of racial oppression. To cope with this, often, the post-colonial women's historical novel implicates alternative histories, such as dreams and myths in order to rebuke Western structures. For example, both Maxine Hong Kingston's diasporic memoir, *The Woman Warrior* (1976) and Edwidge Danticat's account of the Haitian genocide, *The Farming of Bones* (1998), interpolate their narratives with alternative histories. Kelli Lyon Johnson argues

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<sup>39</sup> Adichie, 'Truth and Lies'.

<sup>40</sup> Laura S. Brown, 'Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma', in *Trauma*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1996), pp.100-113 (p.102).

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*



that, post-colonial women writers, ‘must create and inhabit ‘in-between spaces’’<sup>42</sup> and thus the novel ‘becomes a new narrative space. These novelists create and claim a new, literary space in which collective memory expresses a national identity that includes members of the memory community previous excluded from historical discourse because of racial, class, sexual, or national identity’<sup>43</sup>. Contrary to this, Adichie chooses to punctuate *Yellow Sun* with excerpts of ‘The Book’, which engages directly with traditional historiography. Adichie does not turn to alternative histories but instead, criticises history and, through her realism, puts ‘under pressure the conceptual limits that excluded them in the first place’<sup>44</sup>. Confronting Nigeria’s colonial scars, how she ‘grew up in the shadow of Biafra’<sup>45</sup>, Adichie confronts this scarring of African personhood and therefore implicates them in her analysis. As put concisely by Susan Andrade, ‘Adichie’s writing makes clear that the hesitancy of the earlier moment of women’s literary history in Africa no longer defines, female-authored novels’<sup>46</sup>. Engaging with the historical novel genre, *Yellow Sun* hybridises male and female experience alongside Western and post-colonial histories, through which Adichie enforces her feminist belief ‘to empower boys and girls to understand there is no single way to be - but also to understand that the only universal in this world is difference’<sup>47</sup>.

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<sup>42</sup> Kelli Lyon Johnson, ‘Both Sides of the Massacre: Collective Memory and Narrative on Hispaniola’, *Mosaic*, 36 (2003), 75-91 (p. 76).

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Anderson, p.130.

<sup>45</sup> Adichie, ‘Truth and Lies’.

<sup>46</sup> Susan Z. Andrade, ‘Adichie’s Genealogies: National and Feminine Novels’, *Research in African Literatures*, 42 (2011), 91-101 (p. 92).

<sup>47</sup> Brookes.

## Escaping the Margin

I now move on to my close reading of *Yellow Sun*, focusing on Adichie's insight into marginalised histories as a contemporary, diasporic, woman author. As a subject of diaspora, a position explored in many of her texts, such as *Americanah* (2013), Adichie's experience 'has given [her] a vivid awareness, expressed in this novel [*Yellow Sun*], of the costs of exile'<sup>48</sup>. Susan Strehle widens the definition of diaspora, describing Adichie's three protagonists as 'yearning for a sense of membership that they never achieve in communities whose edges they haunt'<sup>49</sup>, often ensuing a 'self-exiling'<sup>50</sup>. *Yellow Sun*'s most extreme cases of self-exile are found in relation to rape, a trauma not openly recognised by society, located 'beyond the public and male experiences of trauma to the private, secret experiences women encounter in the interpersonal realm'<sup>51</sup>. Through documenting rape, an act of violence representative of the oppression of women, *Yellow Sun* centralises women's repressed trauma within history. Adichie's unconventional choice to depict the perspective of the rapist, Ugwu, rather than the rape victim, who she nonetheless centralises, complicates and blurs binaries that simplify history into hero and villain, perpetrator and victim, public and private. I focus on the two, most detailed accounts of rape: Ugwu's participation in the gang rape, as told from the perspective of a male, Ugwu; and Amala's rape by Odenigbo, as told from the perspective of a woman, Olanna. Adichie's promotion of the 'women's sphere'<sup>52</sup> to 'the status of historical truth'<sup>53</sup>, is extended in the way each rape effects the larger frame of recognised history, Ugwu

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<sup>48</sup> Susan Strehle, 'Producing Exile: Diasporic Vision in Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*', *MFS*, 57 (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2011), 650-672 (pp.654-667).

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> Brown, p.102.

<sup>52</sup> Anderson, p.134.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

atonement 'for his role in the rape by becoming the author of the book'<sup>54</sup>, whilst Amala's rape creates Baby, this history's future generation.

Throughout *Yellow Sun*, many women, including Ugwu's sister, Arize, Ebrechi, Urenwa and the 'starving girls' (p.398) become 'raped by people who ought to protect them'<sup>55</sup>, most symbolically soldiers, the epitome of civilian protection. Ugwu's participation in the squadron's gang rape of the bar girl, details this. Initially, Ugwu attempts to remove himself, however, calling upon Ugwu's feeling of social diaspora, the soldier's comments 'Target Destroyer, aren't you a man? *I bukwa nwoke?*' (p.365), cause him to participate. Throughout *Yellow Sun*, Ugwu is infatuated with the soldiers, 'in brave uniforms stiff with starch, half of a yellow sun gleaming on their sleeves' (p.199). Ugwu's statement, '[h]e longed to play a role, to act. Win the war' (p.199) highlights the falsified 'role' of the hero as a 'gleaming' ideological character that will forever remain impossible to realise, damaging individuals in their attempts. From arriving at Nsukka, as a low class, uneducated village-boy who compares the fridge to '[a] cold barn' (p.6), throughout, Ugwu exists on the margins society; as 'he watches without understanding'<sup>56</sup>. A servant in Odenigbo's home, Ugwu's desire to maintain wholeness in the domestic space, '[h]e would cook a perfect *jollof* rice for their reconciliation meal' (p.242), reveal his search for a tangible identity, which the home and the nation-state promise to, but often do not, provide. Adichie problematises how, it is only after joining the army that, 'Ugwu was no longer just Ugwu, he was now one of 'our boys' (p.399). Ugwu becomes the archetypal war hero, superficially achieving the sense of the belonging he desired, despite his complicity in the rape which remains hidden from public understanding. Focusing on Ugwu, critics have considered *Yellow Sun* a bildungsroman, a genre that, 'supposedly promotes

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<sup>54</sup> Ngwira, pp.45-46.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> Strehle, p.667.

ways of thinking about community and belonging, especially of nationhood'<sup>57</sup>. Ugwu's transformation from a village-boy to an educated man, culminating in his authoring of 'The Book', fools readers into believing Ugwu will materialise into the archetypal national hero. However, through detailing Ugwu's complicity in the rape, Adichie abandons reductive stereotypes, such as the 'image of a black hero, defiant towards the oppressor'<sup>58</sup>. Refusing to heroise Ugwu, yet framing him within the typical bildungsroman, Adichie encourages readers to think of community, belonging and nationhood atypically, in terms of human flaw and difference.

Although minor in comparison to the bar girl, by documenting Ugwu's trauma caused by the rape, Adichie comprehends the complexity of oppression. Undeniably presented as a perpetrator, although Ugwu attempts to 'downplay his participation in the war and its violence, insisting that 'he was not living life, life was living him (p.364)<sup>59</sup>, as Michael A. Donnelly notes, through Ugwu's ownership of verbs, 'he entered her' (p.365), 'Adichie does not let him parry away his participation'<sup>60</sup>. However, Adichie also reveals how 'the ordinary under oppressive circumstances may reveal [...] oppression of victims by fellow victims'<sup>61</sup> alongside how, 'the perpetrators themselves are victims of oppression and of their own violence'<sup>62</sup>. The first sentence of the paragraph following the rape scene, '[t]here were more operations. Ugwu's fear sometimes overwhelmed him, froze him. He unwrapped his mind from his body, separated the two, while he lay in the trench, pressing himself into the mud' (p.365), metaphorically gestures towards Ugwu's trauma connected to the rape. The phrase, 'there were more operations'(p.365), alludes to the nature of the gang rape, whilst the logistical placement of Ugwu pressed into the mud shows, not only the

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<sup>57</sup> Donnelly, p.247.

<sup>58</sup> Ngwira, p.46.

<sup>59</sup> Donnelly, p.260.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

moral lowliness of his action but also his psychological state. Unlike Olanna, who vocalises her ‘Dark Swoops’ (p.156), an emotion Adichie capitalises as if it were a historical event, Ugwu struggles to comprehend his psychological trauma in the same way and instead imbues it into ‘[w]ar and genocide, which are the work of men and male-dominated culture’<sup>63</sup>. As highlighted by Ngwira, Brenda Cooper ‘finds it highly problematic that Ugwu atones for his role in the rape by becoming the author of the book. To her, by resolving the rape incident ‘in favour of the penitent male subject, in the interests of an African cultural and national healing project’ means that ‘Adichie has compromised her feminism’ in the novel’’<sup>64</sup>. However, Ngwira argues that by not creating ‘the stereotypical pitiful suffering war victim’<sup>65</sup> the reader is drawn into ‘appreciating the intricate interiority and complexity of several characters’<sup>66</sup>. In alignment with Ngwira, *Yellow Sun* embraces masculine private histories, de-stigmatising private histories, as exemplified in Richard’s embarrassment due to his impotency, Ugwu existence in the ‘women’s sphere’<sup>67</sup> of Odenigbo’s home alongside his trauma, which stems from rape rather than war. Alongside this, I believe by placing Ugwu and his flawed authoring of *The Book*, a book that is ‘in favour of the penitent male subject’<sup>68</sup>, within the larger, sensitised context of *Yellow Sun*, Adichie critiques historical narratives and their masculine agendas. Returning from the army, Ugwu tries, yet fails, to write poetry, ‘he tore it up’ (p.397). Similarly Okeoma, a character based on Christopher Okigbo, no longer writes poetry after participating as a soldier. Throughout the novel, poetry is presented as synonymous with memory, ‘*If the sun refuses to rise, we will make it rise*. The title of Okeoma’s poem came to her’(p.41), whilst physical books, particularly towards the novel’s end, become the ‘blackened paper crisps from the pages of his half-burnt books’ (p.433). Henceforth, as the novel progresses

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<sup>63</sup> Brown, p.101.

<sup>64</sup> Ngwira, p. 45.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> Anderson, p.134.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

and the text is placed under the pressures of conflict, Adichie reveals the importance of subversive historiography and ‘emotional truth’<sup>69</sup>.

Dissimilar to Ugwu, Odenigbo, reflecting upon his rape of Amala, feels, ‘as if I have been dropped into something I don’t entirely understand’ (p.231). As an educated Igbo male, with Igbo literally written in his name, Odenigbo finds himself relatively at the centre of Biafran society. Unused to the experience of self-exile, Odenigbo struggles to comprehend how he is at fault. Contrastingly, Amala, a poor, unmarried village girl, expresses symptoms of trauma and self-exile in her rejection of her child and refusal to eat. As argued by Laura S Brown, women become subject to ‘the myth of the willing victim of interpersonal violence, a myth that serves to uphold power relationships in a heteropatriachal society between men and women, between people of colour and white people, between poor people and those with wealth’<sup>70</sup>. Punishing herself as the ‘willing victim’<sup>71</sup>, Amala becomes both victim and perpetrator, misconstrued as complicit in her own rape. Our only insight into Amala’s experience is focalised through Olanna, ‘the dominant emotional ‘consciousness’ of the novel’<sup>72</sup>, ‘Olanna was watching her. Perhaps it was hate she felt for Odenigbo. How much did one know of the true feelings of those who did not have a voice?’ (p.250). Amala and the nameless bar girl, are not spoken for by Adichie but instead represented as silence. In ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argues, ‘it is better to acknowledge that the subaltern female exists as the unrepresentable in discourse, a shadowy figure on its margins. Any attempt to retrieve her voice will disfigure her speech’<sup>73</sup>. By phrasing ‘those who did not have a voice?’(p.250) as a question, Adichie draws attention to the problem of representation, highlighting the impossibility of

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<sup>69</sup> Adichie, ‘Truth and Lies’.

<sup>70</sup> Brown, p.106.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> Aghogho Akpome, ‘Narrating a new nationalism: Rehistoricisation and political apologia in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun*’, *English Academy Review* 30:1 (2013), 22-38 (p.30).

<sup>73</sup> John McLeod, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak’, in *Beginning Postcolonialism* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 2010) pp. 217-225 (pp.220-221).

writing a complete version of history. Similar to Olanna, as a middle-class educated Nigerian woman, Adichie cannot access aspects of Amala's experience, and draws attention to this lack. However, by placing Olanna as the only character to notice Amala's trauma, Adichie nonetheless highlights the importance of a female focaliser, mirrored in her importance as author, due to shared experiences of patriarchal oppression.

Amala's rape and its creation of Baby, cause this private trauma to influence the larger public sphere of history. Culturally, in West Africa, 'children represent continuity of the family and the community'<sup>74</sup>. Baby's unannounced introduction in the first section of 'The Late Sixties', the section in which the war begins, signifies the fracturing of the community and henceforth the nation. Baby is simultaneously a product of Odenigbo's adultery towards Olanna, an event that almost causes the dissolution of the wholeness of the central domestic space, and Amala's rape. Baby, remains unnamed throughout, however, although never made official, 'Kainene, suggested Chiamaka. I've always loved that name: God is beautiful. Kainene will be her godmother'(p.254). Baby's Remaining nameless when coupled with Kainene's unresolved disappearance at the end of the novel, gesture towards the godlessness of the war. Throughout, Baby's 'tiny unformed voice' (p. 122) develops, her final question suspiciously asking, '[w]hy is Auntie Kainene still at *afia attack*?'. (p.432). Connected to both 'Mummy Olanna' and her birth mother, Amala 'who did not have a voice'(p250.), Baby becomes the 'inheritor of a certain people's story'<sup>75</sup>. In response to Baby's question, Olanna states, 'she saw a sign in Baby's questions too, although she could not yet decipher its meaning' (p.432). Reaching beyond the novel, Baby's final questioning of Kainene who is never found, alongside the gradual forming of her voice, highlights the inconclusive nature of trauma and the duty of the next generation to vocalise and memorialise repressed histories.

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<sup>74</sup> Anita Pandey, 'Language and Representation: Linguistic Aesthetics of Female West African Writers', *Research in African Literatures*, 35 (2004), 112-132. (p.117).

<sup>75</sup> Rody, p.3.

Adichie's representation of these violent traumas, aligns with how, 'a feminist analysis of the experience of psychic trauma requires that we change our vision of what is "human" to a more inclusive image and will move us to a radical revisiting of our understanding of the human condition'<sup>76</sup>, a revisiting I will now address in the monument, Counter-monument dialogic.

### **The Monument, Counter-Monument Dialogic**

I will now compare *Yellow Sun* to the monument and counter-monument, drawing together the component parts of my essay to consider the objective, monumental status of the text. Typically, 'nation-states have built unified identities [...] physically embodied in monolithic, didactic monuments that take complex moments of historical conflict and transform them into clear stories of national triumph or martyrdom'<sup>77</sup>. This tripartite dialogic connecting dominant history, the nation and the traditional monument, is brought to the fore in *Yellow Sun*, through its countering of each. *Yellow Sun* represents marginalised history, it memorialises the secessionist, non-existent nation-state of Biafra and, as I argue now, it functions as a counter-monument. Each form is 'born resisting the very premises of their birth'<sup>78</sup>. As mentioned in the introduction, Young defines the counter-monument as 'anti-heroic, often ironic, and self-effacing'<sup>79</sup>, a critique of the monument's premise, whilst maintaining its framing and field of discussion. In Quentin Stevens, Karen A. Franck and Ruth Fazakerley's, 'Counter-monuments: the anti-monumental and the dialogic', the counter-monument form is compartmentalised into five sections: Subject, Form, Site, Visitor Experience, and Meaning; a structure I use for my argument. For the sake of my honing analysis, I shall be

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<sup>76</sup> Brown, p.110.

<sup>77</sup> Elizabeth Strakosch, 'Counter-Monuments and Nation-Building in Australia', *Peace Review* 22:3 (2010) 268-275 (p.269) .

<sup>78</sup> Young, pp.93-119.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*



comparing: Subject, to Ugwu and the hero ideal; Form, and its representation of ‘those who did not have a voice’ (p.250); Site, in connection with *Yellow Sun*’s identity as a book; Visitor Experience, investigating the public and private spheres of history; and finally, Meaning, focusing on Adichie’s comprehension of the inconclusive, impossible task of documenting history.

### Subject

The subjects of monuments ‘are typically affirmative: glorifying an event or a person, or celebrating an ideology’<sup>80</sup>, whilst counter-monuments ‘represent identities marginalised within traditional narratives’<sup>81</sup>. As I have argued, as a post-colonial women’s historical novel with its focus on social diaspora, *Yellow Sun* represents those elided from hegemonic narratives. In the counter-monument’s attempt to inclusively represent society, Elizabeth Strakosch acknowledges the possibility of them becoming ‘nation-building rather than “nation-challenging”’<sup>82</sup>. In order to combat this, Strakosch states, ‘to genuinely share their most central symbolic spaces’<sup>83</sup>, counter-monuments, ‘need to tolerate more unsettling, fractured moments to their crimes’<sup>84</sup>. Adichie’s ‘unsettling’<sup>85</sup> detailing of the violence of rape, an act that represents Biafrans also as perpetrators, resists any idealistic glossing of a collective body that may become nation-building. Metaphorically, within this microcosm, *Yellow Sun* explores how, as the Biafran government perpetuated an image of one-sided victimhood, ‘Biafra’s real victimisation at times obfuscated its violence’<sup>86</sup>. Adichie’s use of Ugwu, a character mimicking the typical war hero, bildungsroman and author, as the reader’s most detailed example of perpetration, criticises traditional monuments. That it is Ugwu’s ‘monumental

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<sup>80</sup> Quentin Stevens, Karen A. Franck and Ruth Fazakerly, ‘Counter-monuments: the anti-monumental and the dialogic’, *The Journal of Architecture* 17:6 (2012), 951- 971 (pp.955-956).

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> Strakosch, pp.268 - 269.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> Donnelly, p.248.

seduction', 'the fascism that causes us to love power, to desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us'"<sup>87</sup>, that causes his participation in the gang rape, highlights the damaging power of nationalist ideologies. Condemning Ugwu for his actions, yet framing him within the typical bildungsroman, as mentioned, Adichie encourages readers to think of collective identity atypically, in terms of human flaw and difference. Revealing how, 'the perpetrators themselves are victims of oppression and of their own violence'<sup>88</sup>, not only removes international victimisation of the passive African subject 'shaped by a humanitarian ethos that sees Africa through the lens of "distant suffering"'<sup>89</sup>, but on a local scale binds Nigerian and Biafran readers through their shared identity as both perpetrators and victims.

### Form

As outlined by Stevens, Franck and Fazakerly, form is the, 'most notable and common feature of anti-monumentality'<sup>90</sup>. *Yellow Sun* subverts traditional form via the intertwined perspectives of its three narrators and the broken chronology of the plot. Alongside this, to cope with representing marginalised subjects, counter-monuments typically express 'voids instead of solids, absence instead of presence [...], dispersed or fragmented rather than unified in a single, orderly composition'<sup>91</sup>. I would like to use the monument analysed by Huyssen, Christo and Jean-Claude's *Wrapped Reichstag*<sup>92</sup>, to unpack *Yellow Sun*'s form. The artwork involved the wrapping, and consequent concealment, of the infamous government building associated with the Second and Third Reich. This counter-monument strategy, 'to make visible, to unveil, to reveal what was

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<sup>87</sup> Andreas Huyssen, 'Monumental Seduction', in *Acts of Memory*, ed. Meike Bal, Jonathan Crewe, and Leo Spitzer (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1999), pp.191-207 (p.199).

<sup>88</sup> Donnelly, p.260.

<sup>89</sup> Coundouriotis, 'Toward a People's History', p.98.

<sup>90</sup> Stevens, p.956.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> Christo and Jean-Claude, *Wrapped Reichstag*, (1995).

hidden when it was visible'<sup>93</sup> is adopted by Adichie in her highlighting of the silence of the subaltern female, the silence of the nameless bar girl, 'of those who did not have a voice?' (p.250).

When discussing *Yellow Sun*, Adichie has stated, '[p]erhaps it is because to write realistic fiction about a war, especially one central to the history of one's country, is to be aware of a responsibility to something larger than art'<sup>94</sup>. Staying true to realism, Adichie's documents as silences the voices she does not feel qualified to represent, commemorating these victims, without disfiguring their voice.

### Site

As a book, *Yellow Sun*'s site is non-permanent and multiple, its reach transnational. Commemorating the non-existent nation of Biafra, the siteless medium of the novel and its ability to resist the geographical politics of nationhood and colonialism, seem most apt for a topic scarred by such events. Traditionally, monuments are structurally 'prominent, highly visible [and] set apart from everyday space'<sup>95</sup>. In contrast, a counter-monument embraces the 'transitory, uprooting and unstable'<sup>96</sup> conditions of life and often incorporates 'commemoration into everyday urban space instead of setting it apart'<sup>97</sup>. Drawing attention to 'the democratic conviction that there is a legitimate desire for monumental public space'<sup>98</sup>, Huyssen highlights how, in contemporary society, 'our own monumental seduction may indeed be no longer tied up with real built space'<sup>99</sup>, but rather 'has migrated from the real into the image, from the material into the immaterial'<sup>100</sup>. Through the

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<sup>93</sup> Huyssen, p.196.

<sup>94</sup> Adichie, 'Truth and Lies'.

<sup>95</sup> Stevens, p.960.

<sup>96</sup> Huyssen, p.200.

<sup>97</sup> Stevens, pp.960.

<sup>98</sup> Huyssen, pp.205-206.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

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text's siteless nature, its significance is 'constructed in particular times and particular places, contingent on the political, historical, and aesthetic realities'<sup>101</sup>. *Yellow Sun*, in its ability to be democratically possessed, transcends local and global contexts in symbiosis with its meaning. In this way, books are diasporic. Counter-monument critics have noted that, in, 'the work's temporary changing nature is meant to endure longer in memory'<sup>102</sup>. Just as Okeoma's poems return to characters throughout the novel, the 'emotional truth'<sup>103</sup> that characterises Adichie's writing and its ability to constantly evolve with location, reader and time, causes the reoccurrence of commemoration. In 2009, *Yellow Sun* was reviewed as, 'hugely accomplished'<sup>104</sup>, selling, '650,000 copies in Britain alone'<sup>105</sup>, henceforth *Yellow Sun's* reach has internationalised Biafra's memorialisation in ways that perhaps a physical monument could not.

### Visitor Experience

Stevens, Franck and Fazakerly differentiate the visitor experience between the monument and counter-monument by arguing that, unlike the distant 'objectivity' of monuments, counter-monuments 'typically unsettle these conventions of reception by inviting close, bodily encounter by visitors'<sup>106</sup>. Located within the women's historical novel genre, *Yellow Sun* engages with the private sphere. As I have argued, many moments, including the incidences of rape, expose both male and female private histories amongst the chaos of the war, as exemplified in Richard's impotence and Olanna's 'Dark Swoops'(p.156). Documenting these private moments, however uncomfortable they may make certain readers feel, Adichie taps into intimacy and humanness. Resisting what Young

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<sup>101</sup> Young, p.95.

<sup>102</sup> Stevens, pp.959-961.

<sup>103</sup> Adichie, 'Truth and Lies'.

<sup>104</sup> William Skidelsky, 'The Interview: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie', *The Guardian* (2009) <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/apr/05/chimamanda-ngozi-adichie-interview>> [date accessed 26 April 2019]

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

terms as ‘a facile kind of Wiedergutmachung’<sup>107</sup>, a German word referring to reparation, such pervasive emotion engages readers in a subjective, interpersonal way. Universalising conflict through different kinds of ‘emotional truth’<sup>108</sup>, readers both Biafran and Nigerian, local and global can find a way to access the text. It has been suggested that, ‘[p]eople’s responses, as revealed in their actions, may be as monumental as the artworks themselves’<sup>109</sup>. The ambiguity that pervades *Yellow Sun*: such as the suggestive nature the impotence of the British male, the colonial readings this may uncover, versus the literal humanness of it<sup>110</sup>; Adichie provokes her reader’s assumptions, stimulating discussion and keeping the memory of the war shifting and alive.

### Meaning

Perpetuating dominant historiographic style, traditional monuments are ‘didactic, imparting clear, unified messages through figural representation, explicit textual or graphic reference to people, places or events’<sup>111</sup>. Contrastingly, aiming to ‘depoliticise commemoration or open it up to multiple and potentially conflicting interpretations’<sup>112</sup>, counter-monument’s meanings often fluctuate depending on the subjectivity of the viewer. Through representing the three diasporic perspectives of Ugwu, Olanna and Richard, each intersecting different spheres of race, gender, nationality and class, Adichie abstracts and focalises history in a way that, ‘allows multiple, competing publics to share the site’<sup>113</sup>. Multiplying representations of history, Adichie emphasises the impossibility of the historiographic task. Aghogho Akpome has criticised Adichie, suggesting *Yellow Sun* ‘enacts a similar oversimplification, if not an identical erasure and/or misrepresentation of the historical

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<sup>107</sup> Young, p.96.

<sup>108</sup> Adichie, ‘Truth and Lies’.

<sup>109</sup> Stevens, p.961.

<sup>110</sup> ‘Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’, *Bookclub*, BBC Radio 4, 8 May 2008.

<sup>111</sup> Stevens, pp.961-192.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

anxieties of minorities against the perceived dominance of majority ethnic groups in Nigeria's pre-war political architecture<sup>114</sup>. However, though acknowledging the insufficiency of *Yellow Sun* as a complete representation of history, I believe Adichie resists elision through the text's self-awareness, her rendering of Biafrans as perpetrators, and the fact that, genealogically, perhaps this is the only story she feels qualified to write. Epitomised in the unresolved disappearance of Kainene at the novels end, alongside the future generation metaphorically emblematised in Baby, *Yellow Sun* reaches beyond its end to '[w]here visitors are explicitly invited to participate actively in ongoing interpretations of a commemorative site'<sup>115</sup>, in recovering Biafra's memory.

## Conclusion

Speaking of her desire to write *Yellow Sun*, Adichie stated, 'I wanted to write — I had to write — about this period because I grew up in the shadow of Biafra, because I wanted to take ownership of a history that defines me, because I lost both my grandfathers in the war, because many of the issues that led to the war remain salient [...] because I do not ever want to forget'<sup>116</sup>. Growing out of a felt need for memorialisation, *Yellow Sun* becomes interwoven with the project of the monument. However, as I have demonstrated, monuments and their connection to nationalist ideologies and dominant historical narratives, work against the essence of Adichie's historiographic project. As a contemporary, diasporic female author, genealogically and emotionally connected to the Biafran war, Adichie possesses an insight for the construction of a valid, sensitive and effective counter-monument sculpted for contemporary needs. The self-awareness and literal self-exile of *Yellow Sun*, manifest in the incompleteness of its conclusion, in each characters fragmented perception and in its

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<sup>114</sup> Akpome, p.33.

<sup>115</sup> Stevens, p.962.

<sup>116</sup> Adichie, 'Truth and Lies'

resonating question, ‘How much did one know of the true feelings of those who did not have a voice?’ (p.250), become its counter-monument. Huyssen states, ‘the only monument that counts is the one already imagined as ruin’<sup>117</sup> a feeling that is most aptly addressed in the last chapter of *Yellow Sun* when Olanna, in harmony with ‘emotional truth’<sup>118</sup>, reflects ‘[s]he would not place her memory on things that strangers could barge in and take away. ‘My memory is inside me.’ (p.432). In this final moment, Olanna removes commemoration from physical possession. Once we have completed our reading of the novel, Adichie highlights the ephemerality of physical objects and instead turns to memory. Adichie’s counter-monument, *Yellow Sun* exists in each reader’s mind and in our universal human connection to difference, forever transitory, it belongs to those in the margins.

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<sup>117</sup> Huyssen, p.197.

<sup>118</sup> Adichie, ‘Truth and Lies’

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