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"The Professor As War Hero in Selected Nigerian Biafra-Novels"

Summary

'Biafra' means 'trauma' for the Ibo people. It comes as no surprise that Ibo writers keep returning to this communal trauma. Writing about it is an attempt of coping with the past, even if the writers keep repeating themselves, and seem to be laboring under what has been called 'symbolization compulsions'.
The three Nigerian Biafra novels by Ibo authors which I have selected for closer analysis feature a conspicuous number of professors, lecturers, and intellectuals who take an active part in the Nigerian civil war of 1968-71 and who are continuously addressed by their academic titles. In contrast to the protagonists of the traditional campus novel, these professors are actively involved in real war activities, and the authors show that the attempt to split off Biafra from the rest of Nigeria was not just an adventure taken on by a small clique of badly advised young Ibo officers but was supported by the intellectual elite of the Ibo nation. However, the novelists refrain from any kind of glorification. Their male professors are all too human and have their own individual shortcomings, while the females excel by their resilience and capacity to suffer. Since we are dealing with historical novels, and the novelists do not attempt to rewrite history, their professors cannot win the war and their defeat is determined from the start.

Introduction

In the campus novel as we know it today, professors are always heroes - or anti-heroes - in the widest sense of the word, involved in battles of letters and books and in those of the amorous kind, swapping their positions and wives, or jousting for UNESCO chairs, winning or losing them, but their heroism is always of a comical kind, and not to be taken too seriously.

In the historical novels about the Nigerian civil war, this is different. I have selected three Nigerian Biafra novels for closer inspection: Chukwuemeka Ike's *Sunset at Dawn* (1976), Buchi Emecheta's *Destination Biafra* (1982), and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006). More Biafra novels can be found, mostly by Ibo writers,[1] but my aim is not to give an overview of the Nigerian Biafra novel. Instead, I want to focus on the image of professors and intellectuals in the novels mentioned above, which, I trust, will have a certain representativeness also with regard to the other novels on my list.

[1] Adichie mentions a number of additional titles in her Author's Note in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, for example, Elechi Amadi, *Sunset in Biafra*, Cyprian Ekwensi, *Divided We Stand*, Eddie Iroh, *The Siren in the Night*, Flora Nwapa, *Never Again*, or Wole Soyinka, *The Man that Died*. One could add Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy* (1986), or Chris Abani's *Song for Night* (2007) to that list. For more Biafra novels see Hugh Hodges,."Writing Biafra: Adichie, Emecheta and the Dilemmas of Biafran War Fiction." *Postcolonial Text*, vol. 5, no. 1 (2009), 1-13.

The sheer quantity of Biafra novels, which have come out in the meantime, most of them by Ibo writers, speaks of the collective traumatization of the Ibo people. This also applies to the many repetitions in the novels, the recurrence of similar characters, situations, or references. They bear witness to what Ato Quayson, building on Freud's idea of 'repetition compulsion', has called "symbolization compulsions"[2]: compulsive narrative attempts to come to terms with the memory of past atrocities and the loss of more than a million lives, most of them innocent women and children. Even if the narrative quality of these novels is sometimes unsatisfactory,[3] the narrative attempts of coping with past trauma have to be seen in a positive light.

The 'professor' as war hero in selected Nigerian Biafra novels is a highly ambivalent character. I am using the term 'professor' in a general sense, including male and female academics and intellectuals with aspirations for lecturing at a Nigerian university. While the males are defeated by circumstances, by false heroism, but also by their own shortcomings as human beings, the females excel by their pragmatism, their resilience, and their capacity for suffering. Even if the postcolonial authors seem to admire their intellectuals, because education as such has a high rank in the value system of the Ibo people, in the end they have to admit that professors don't win the war, not because they are inefficient and without enthusiasm, but because they have totally misjudged the situation and been blinded by their own enthusiasm.

If there is a Nigerian writer who has been writing university novels it is Chukwuemeka Ike who has spent most of his life at universities - or in the vicinity of them.[4] At least four of his novels are set in a university context: *Toads for Supper* (1965), *The Naked Gods* (1970), *Expo '77* (1980), and *Our Children Are Coming* (1990). Ike knows the Nigerian university landscape inside out, but he also played an active role in the Nigerian civil war when he acted as refugee officer for Umuahia in 1968/69.

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[2] Ato Quayson, "Symbolization Compulsions," in *Calibrations: Reading for the Social* (Minneapolis: U. of Minnesota P., 2003), 76–98.

[3] See, f.e. Hodges p. 1f., who quotes critics calling it "awkwardly constructed", "aesthetically tortuous", or a "fictional disaster".

[4] Ike got his BA from the University College of Ibadan in 1955, and his MA from Stanford in 1966. After a career as a teacher, he became assistant registrar at Ibadan, and deputy registrar at Nsukka. He was a member of the Planning and Management Committee of the University of Nigeria, 1970, Visiting Professor of English at Jos University 1983-85, and, after his career as civil servant, Pro-Chancellor and Chairman of Council at the University of Benin in Benin City until 1991. Cf. http://nigeriavillagesquare.co./forum/articles-comments/4977-interviews-34-prof-vincent-chukwuemeka-ike.html, accessed 15 October 2015.

The cover of the 1993 paperback edition of his novel[5] which I used shows a person in a camouflage suit before a camouflage tarpaulin, holding an automatic rifle, an AK 47 Kalashnikov, and looking defiantly into the camera. A soldier of the Biafran army? He has no national emblems or nationality marking. The back page of the cover just states that the photo was taken by Red Saunders, a British photographer who worked for the *Sunday Times* magazine, but it does not say who the person is that is looking into the camera. More often than not, the covers of novels feature pictures of their heroines and heroes, so that in this case the person on the cover could be taken to represent Dr Kanu, the novel's protagonist. But could it also be the younger Ike himself? Even if it is not Ike, the front cover implies a strong identification between the photo and Ike's name that is printed at the bottom of it. Kalashnikovs, by the way, were provided by Russia to the Nigerian army, not to the Biafrans. This means that the person on the front page is obviously proudly presenting a weapon that was taken from the enemy, the federal Nigerian army.

Ike's *Sunset at Dawn* begins during the first days of the Biafra War in 1967. It basically relates the story of Dr Amilo Kanu, who, before the war began, had been assured of "appointment as Lecturer in the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Ibadan in January 1967" (32). When the secession of Biafra from Nigeria was announced 30 May, he had to relinquish his post at Ibadan University together with many of his colleagues and had to return to the East, which, after the 1966 July pogroms in the north, had declared itself independent from Nigeria and had adopted the name of Biafra.

Before the civil war, Dr Kanu is an ardent believer in Nigeria's unity. When the civil war begins, he is totally undecided which side to stand on. Is it better to remain neutral and hope for this post of lecturer that has been promised to him? Or should he embrace the case of Biafra and play his role accordingly? Many Ibos like him were in the same situation. Especially the Ibo intellectuals were anti-tribalists and believers in Nigerian unity. Ironically, the tendency to split off from this artificially conceived country of 'Nigeria', whose name was invented by the wife of one of the first colonial administrators, the propagator of self-rule Frederick Lugard, was much greater in the north amongst the Muslim Hausa than it was in the Christian east. The pogroms made it quite clear to most Ibos that their only chance of survival lay in their flight to their home

[5] Ibadan University Press.

country, for Ibos were killed not only in the north, on Hausa territory, but also in the west, in Lagos and Ibadan.

When the novel opens, Dr Kanu has been appointed Director of Mobilization. We meet him on the campus of Enugu in the examination hall where he is addressing various contingents of recruits from different parts of the newly created country of Biafra. When there is a loud detonation not far from the hall, he assures the anxious, machet-carrying recruits that it was one of their own bombs going off for experimental purposes.

When he comes home to his Hausa wife Fatima, who stems from the north, he finds her weeping over the remains of the body of his first-born son, who has been torn apart by a Nigerian shell. The Director of Mobilization is devastated, but nevertheless he goes on with his duties.

In the beginning, Dr Kanu is a flawed hero, a middling or 'wavering' hero in the tradition of Walter Scott's *Waverley*. Separated for too long from his wife Fatima, he finds himself a whore, a young girl called 'Love', for men must be "'shelling' once in a while." (163) In this context, the reader is presented with one of the fairly frequent comic episodes in the novel. When Fatima comes to visit him unexpectedly, he hurriedly gets out of bed and dresses himself, while Love escapes through a rear window. Fatima, who has smelled the rat, is calming down, and Dr Kanu can almost get away with his amorous adventure when his son Emeka bursts into the room with the words: "'Mummy, look. Balloon!'" (158), holding up a Durex condom. The farcical qualities of a scene such as this one are obvious. As far as his hero Dr Kanu is concerned, it emphasizes his human qualities. All in all, however, Ike's dealing with his characters is highly ambivalent and disorientates his readers. This must especially apply to female ones because Ike's text is written from a male perspective which, at times, is clearly chauvinistic. Dr Kanu does not give up 'Love' but installs her in such a way that they can be meeting more undisturbed in the future. This does not preclude that, in the course of the novel, he becomes at least a stronger, if not a wiser man. As Director of Mobilization, he is sending thousands of badly armed young men to their certain deaths. His decision to join the army and fight at the front, is certainly motivated by a desire to do something more meaningful for Biafra. Or is it his underlying death wish that makes him risk his life? Ike is astonishingly reticent to lay open his psychological motivation, and although there is a scene where Ike has Dr Kanu explain his motives to "H. E.", that is, His Excellency, the Head of state, Colonel Ojukwu himself, the reader remains in the dark about his real motivation.

As a result of this interview with the Colonel, however, Fatima and Emeka are sent abroad to Libreville, Congo, Dr Kanu joins the army, and in one of his first battles (in which he excels by his courage) he is badly wounded. Fatima is reconciled to him and his family, having seen the many refugee children that are flown out of Biafra but die on their way from Kwashiorkor[6] - she sends him a reconciliatory letter containing - amongst presents for his Ibo parents - two packets of Durex condoms for himself, so that he does "not contract Bonny disease or whatever they call V.D. in Biafra..." (218)
The ensuing dialogue between his friend Akwaelumo, the carrier of the letter, and Dr Kanu, makes it quite clear why I have my doubts about the moral stance of the novel and its partly chauvinist attitudes: "'Terrific. That's a blank cheque for you, man! 'You are my witness,' Dr Kanu replied, grinning broadly as he folded the letter." (218) Again, the reader at this point is left somewhat concerned and puzzled about the value system behind the whole novel, and this ambivalent feeling about Dr Kanu remains up to the end, when, still in hospital, he finds his death in a Nigerian air raid. The ethical ambivalence mentioned above is created by Ike' style of narration, by his wavering between an external, more objective point of view, and an internal, more subjective one, partly using Akwaelumo, Dr Kanu's friend, as focalizer:

> Where Mr Akwaelumo could not see eye to eye with Dr Kanu was in his decision to join the army as combatant officer. That was to allow idealism to run riot. One does not have to commit suicide to demonstrate one's love with Biafra. As a Director in charge of an essential war service, Dr Kanu was already giving maximum service to his country. Or had Amilo been trying to advertise himself? To please H.E.? No, it could not be. Amilo had a charismatic personality, but he was not ostentatious. Nor was he a boot-licker. Could it be that it was Akwaelumo himself who was at fault? Lacking in courage? Lacking in conviction? Placing the fear of death above everything else?
> Dr Kanu had become a national hero. A chapter had been earmarked for him in the book already commissioned by H.E. on Biafra's War Heroes. He had received the D.S.C. as compared with the B.B.M. (Biafra Bronze Medal) recently conferred on Mr Akwaelumo and a handful of others engaged in essential services. Dr Kanu's name would be engraved in a memorial plaque to be erected at the end of war. What more could a man aspire to, even if he lived a hundred years?" (242f.)

In the first sentence of the first paragraph, the narrator starts evaluating the situation from an auctorial perspective. He then begins to slip into Akwaelumo's mind and relates his thoughts from an interior, subjective standpoint. But why should Akwaelumo

[6] Kwashiorkor is a disease that is brought about by malnutrition, especially by protein deficiency.

address his friend formally as Dr Kanu? In the next sentence, he is called by his Christian name Amilo, so we see things again with Akwaelumo's eyes. But who speaks to us in the sentence: "Could it be that it was Akwaelumo himself who was at fault?" Akwaelumo would not address himself in this way. And from whose standpoint is the last paragraph related, from Akwaelumo's or from an auctorial one? It is difficult to determine if the last paragraph is meant ironically or seriously by Ike. After all, the cover photo seems to glorify the war hero. But then: Dr Kanu has to pay with his life, and all that remains of him is a plaque on a wall bearing his name. "What more could a man aspire to, even if he lived a hundred years?" Or could he?

Ike's *Sunset at Dawn* is one of these novels that feature a number of intellectuals, doctors and professors from universities, which is unusual for a historical novel and a war novel on top of that. Besides Dr Kanu, who is the novel's hero, we have the 35-year-old Prof. Emeka Ezenwa, who is a historian at the short-lived University of Biafra, Nsukka, and who left behind his library and all his manuscripts when the federal troops moved in to occupy it, a motif that turns up repeatedly in all of the novels included in this analysis. Ezenwa has "one other reason for moving to Enugu. He was anxious to identify himself with the war effort" (21). "The Directorate of Manpower Utilization had also employed him in the Research Division of the Directorate of Propaganda." (37) Biafra's new leaders are keen on making use of the intellectuals of the country and channeling their talent towards their war efforts. Another example is Dr Osita, "one of Biafra's best-known physicists." (37) "There was no doubt that the assessors would declare him eminently suitable for a professorial appointment." (38) When he appears in the bar of the Progress Hotel in Enugu, which had "taken over the essential function of the House of Assembly (or Parliament)" (19), he proposes a toast on "Biafra's first rocket." (38) Admittedly, it is home-made and it has climbed the sky just for 10 yards but it is an encouraging beginning for Dr Osita and his men which shows that Biafra can do it without foreign help, especially that of Britain and the other European states who are toeing the sidelines, doing nothing to end the civil war because they are afraid of losing their advantageous oil contracts, for, after all, 70 % of the Nigerian oil reserves lie under Biafran ground.

The novels I have selected celebrate the inventiveness of indigenous scientists and engineers, which is desperately needed to compensate for the shortage of supplies even at the beginning of the war. During the July pogroms of 1966, Ibo soldiers in the Nigerian army had to give up all their weapons and flee for their lives. Those who fled to the Ibo

heartland in the east, partly disguised as civilians, arrived without any equipment, without guns or rifles. To replace them took a lot of ingenuity on the side of the Biafrans when they had declared their independence, and this is where the scientists and engineers come in. One of the most celebrated Biafran inventions is a landmine called 'ogbunigwe' (in English 'killer of the crowd'), a devastating killing device filled with dynamite and scraps of metal and covering an angle of roughly 90 degrees and a range of 200 yards. The home-made weapon was produced in different forms: it could be detonated by pulling a wire, or by sensors that reacted to the slightest touch of a foot. It could also be used as a weapon filled with biochemical warfare agents, as we can read in Emecheta's *Destination Biafra* and Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*.

Where does the ingenuity, this knowledge come from? Nigeria, which nowadays has a population of approximately 170 million people, is divided into more than 500 different ethnicities with their respective languages. The largest are the Muslim Hausa-Fulani in the north, the partly Muslim, partly Christian Yoruba in the west, and the Christian Ibo in the east. When England decided to merge the Northern and the Southern Nigeria protectorate in 1914 and put it under indirect rule, they had created a completely artificial political entity in which incompatible cultures, religions and mentalities had to live under one roof.

This incompatibility did not come to the fore as long as Nigeria was ruled by the British as their colony, and as long as the rivalries between the different ethnicities were kept in check by the colonizer. When in 1960 they released Nigeria into independence, the simmering conflicts and tensions broke out, especially because Britain had installed a Hausa-dominated government.

Britain had always preferred the north to the south,[7] because of the more moderate climate, the seeming docility of the Hausa people and their lack of ambition, which meant that they could be more easily manipulated. The emirates of the north cooperated as long as Christian missionaries kept away from their area - which they did.

The east was a different matter altogether. The advent of the Christian missionaries in Ibo land is most impressively related in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. The Catholics were the most active here, while the Anglicans preferred the Yoruba country.[8] With the missionaries came their schools. Education was a most important point on

[7] Cf. Forsyth, p. 9.

[8] Cf. countrystudies.us/nigeria/14.htm, accessed 13 Oct. 2015.

their agenda, admittedly at first to recruit black missionaries to spread the Christian faith, but they also saw to it that the best students could go to British Universities and come back with a university degree.

The novels I am analysing were written by second and third generation Nigerian writers (if we consider Achebe writing in the fifties and sixties to be first generation), that is, by people whose background is strongly shaped by this kind of environment. They come from well-off families whose fathers and mothers can afford a good education for their children. They are consequently aware that for a formerly underdeveloped country such as Nigeria, education is the key to the world. And they have this Ibo spirit!

If there is such a thing as the 'character of a people', the Ibos would have to be described as ambitious, enterprising, business-minded, and open for new experience.[9] To put it in the words of Alan Grey from Emecheta's novel *Destination Biafra*: "They are ambition personified. Every beggar boy in Enugu and Owerri wants to be a doctor." (7)

When the July pogroms start in 1966, we find Ibos in all parts of Nigeria, especially in the north, and also occupying important positions in the Nigerian army, not so much in the infantry but in more elevated positions where technical knowledge is demanded. This has to do with the fact that Ibo land, in contrast to the rest of Nigeria, produced a surplus of educated and knowledgable people. Ibos could go to the north and take positions there because they were qualified for it. After the July coup and the 'cleanings' in the army, the latter had great problems in filling up the vacancies because they could not find qualified personnel.

The first Nigerian universities were the University College of Ibadan (founded as a college of the metropolitan University of London) in 1948, becoming independent in 1962, and the University of Nigeria in Nsukka in 1960. In the course of time, many more private and state universities were founded,[10] turning out a host of examinees with university qualifications.

In traditional pre-colonial Ibo society, it was not so much education that counted but title taking and bearing (or honorary chieftaincy conferment). Within the Ibo social community, individuals could distinguish themselves by being excellent warriors,

[9] Cf. Achebe, p. 74 ff.; Forsyth, p. 8.

[10] Cf. Jake Otonko, "University Education in Nigeria: History, Successes, Failures and the Way Forward". *International Journal of Technology and Inclusive Education*, vol. 1:2 (December 2012), 44-51.

wrestlers,[11] hunters, farmers, or advice givers, thus showing their excellence in different fields. These titles were earned and could not be inherited.

> Honorary chieftaincy conferment is a community's show of appreciation to those so honoured for their contributions in community development, and functions as encouragement for further assistance and participation. It is, therefore, a form of motivation for effective community participation and engineering. In this wise, such conferment becomes symbolic social activity, where dramatic performances are geared towards social coherence and solidarity.[12]

With taking the title, the person concerned also acquired a new identity. The names of the different titles underline this in an interesting way: For instance, somebody who is a successful farmer could take up such names as Ezeji (King of Yam) or Diji (Husband of yams) as title name. (cf. Ukpokolo, 7). Other titles are : Udoka = Peace is Greater (Ukpokolo, 8), Ochendo I = One who Shelters, or Omego = He that Spends or Lavishes Money (Ukpokolo, 8). With the title comes a new identity. The person on whom the title is conferred to has to act accordingly and put his capabilities into the service of his community.

Title taking in the sixties has to be seen in the context of social change and the modernization of Ibo society that began before the gaining of independence but received an extra boost in the years thereafter. The newly independent nation of Nigeria knew how important education had become, now that one had to rely on one's own resources and man/woman power. Many positions in the administration, police, army, had to be refilled by one's own people. Nigerian engineers were needed to develop the country. Nigerian teachers were needed on all levels to teach Nigerian students, and so on.

The Ibos were very quick in realizing this situation. Although there is no visible break with their older tradition, there is a batch of new titles to be taken: educational titles, European titles originally conferred by the University of London or American universities such as Stanford, but now also to be had in one's own country. The sixties are the time when a broad intellectual Nigerian elite was created. The Ibo heartland, for a short time called Biafra, made an important contribution to it.

In the novels under discussion, there is a great predilection for academic titles, and title bearers, and this has to be understood in this context. What the authors I am writing about stress is that the secession of Biafra was not just the result of a clique of mindless

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[11] Cf. the beginning of Achebe's, *Things Fall Apart.*

12 Chinyere Ukpokolo, "Self Identity and Chieftaincy Titles Among the Igbo of South Eastern Nigeria", in: *Lumina*, 20:2, 1-23, here p. 8.

Ibo officers that failed but was supported by the intellectual elite of the Ibo heartland that felt the necessity to pull out of Nigeria to save their people's lives.
The University of Biafra, with its two campuses of Nsukka and Enugu, existed only for a short time - as long as the country of Biafra existed. It turns up as a setting in all of the three novels I have selected for closer analysis. The following excerpt is from Emecheta's *Destination Biafra*:[13]

> It was in the middle of this calm night that the Nigerian soldiers invaded the university town [of Nsukka]. The hungry student soldiers, who were still waiting for the sophisticated arms promised them, rushed almost barehanded to face the automatic weapons of the Nigerian army and they died in their tens and hundreds. Many more were maimed for life; the lucky few fled into the bush. It was a gallant suicidal move. But it did not change the fate of Biafra. (185)

The plot of *Destination Biafra* sets in shortly before Nigeria's independence in 1960. Although her characters bear fictional names, and the action of the novel is imaginary, Emecheta has taken great care to fill in the historical background, and this is where the strengths of this novel lie. The fictional plot relates the story of Debbie Ogedemgbe, "who is neither Ibo nor Yoruba nor Hausa, but simply a Nigerian" (Emecheta in her foreword, viii). She is the daughter of a corrupt politician and minister, who is killed during the January coup of 1966. Debbie is an Oxford graduate in politics, sociology and philosophy. Nevertheless, she decides to join the Nigerian army where she hopes to become a "lecturer in one of the military academies." (57). She and her friend Babs Teteku are the first women ever to have been admitted into this "masculine preserve" (56) - with all the problems appertaining to it in a troubled time, a time of coups and counter-coups, and later on, of civil war. The soldiers are not wont to follow the commands given by a female officer.
Like Jeannie Deans in Walter Scott's *Heart of Midlothian*, who acts as a mediator between the English crown and the rebellious Scottish nation, Emecheta has invented for her heroine Debbie the difficult role of go-between. Emecheta sends her on an (entirely fictitious) mission across the country to convince Abosi (Ojukwu) to agree on

[13] Buchi Emecheta, the author of *Destination Biafra*, hails from Lagos, Nigeria. Emecheta witnessed the civil war from abroad since she followed her husband to England in 1962. She is the author of 16 novels, which appeared in the seventies, eighties, and nineties, so that she might be called a Nigerian 'second generation' writer. She has also written children's books, two plays, and an autobiography. While looking after five children, she earned her BSc (Honours) degree in sociology from the University of London, 1972, and a PhD, also from the University of London, in 1991. Having become famous as a writer, she held visiting professorships in America (for example, at Rutgers, Pennsylvania State and UCLA), in London, and in Calabar, Nigeria. Cf. her autiobiography *Head Above Water* (London: Fontana, 1986).

peace talks with Momoh (Gowon). In the course of this mission, she is caught in an ambush between the fronts and raped by a group of her own soldiers but gets away with her life and finally succeeds in seeing Abosi/Ojukwu. The latter sends her abroad to England as ambassador of the Biafran case, "to stir the consciences of people". (240) In doing so, she follows the path of many other Biafran intellectuals who did exactly what she is doing, for example, Chinua Achebe.[14] In London, she meets her British ex-boyfriend Alan Grey, son of the former British governor, collector of indigenous art and government agent, who, so it turns out, has been be playing a game of double-dealing, providing the federal Nigerian army with British weapons while pretending to help Biafra in setting up human aid. The novel's plot, so it appears, is rather threadbare; Emecheta's feminist intentions are clear, but the characters don't really come to life, and to saddle her fictional female heroine with the heavy burden of reconciling the two hostile historical parties, the Hausa north and the secessionist east, is downright naive and implausible in such a complicated and entangled historical situation.

The surface realism of this novel is underpinned by blatant allegory. A baby child called 'Biafra' does not survive. The woman Debbie is also symbolically representing Biafra: like so often in colonial/postcolonial fiction, the woman is equated with the country. She is gang-raped by her own people (Nigeria), heavily traumatized, but manages to survive. Towards the end of the novel we find out that Debbie has started to write a book about her experiences. It is to be called "*Destination Biafra"* (246), the title of Emecheta's novel, which makes it clear how much Emecheta imaginatively identifies with her heroine, and how much of herself she has put into her writing. The gesture of writing about writing is a metafictional comment on the necessity of writing about Biafra, writing about the collective trauma of that nation, a self-reflection that is also characteristic of Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*.

There are several heroes and heroines in Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*: the twin sisters Olanna and Kainene, daughters of Lagos based Chief Ozobia, a corrupt Nigerian businessman. Olanna has just finished her Master's degree in sociology at London University. Her twin sister Kainene has also graduated, although we do not find out in which subject. Odenigbo is professor of mathematical statistics at Nsukka University. There is the obligatory Englishman, Richard Churchill, who becomes Kainene's lover, obviously modeled upon Emecheta's Alan Grey but positively rewritten, and finally

[14] See his autobiography *There Was a Country*, pp. 108ff.

Ugwu, Odenigbo's houseboy, who develops into a writer in the course of the novel, writing a book that finally receives the title "The World Was Silent When We Died".
The novel is structured in such a way that it shuttles between the past and the present, the first years of Nigeria's independence in the early sixties, and the years of the civil war, 1967 to 1970. The story of the characters mentioned above is skillfully embedded into the troubled history of this time, and the impact of the civil war on the daily lives of these characters is more and more put into the foreground.
Odenigbo is a "revolutionary" (44), as he is ironically called by Kainene, in the sense that he first fights for Nigeria's independence from Britain, and later for Biafra's independence from Nigeria. Odenigbo regularly meets with a group of friends from the university to discuss politics: The round of people who keep assembling under Odenigbo's roof is representative of Nigeria's intellectual elite. There is Miss Adebayo (Yoruba), Okeoma (a poet), Dr. Patel (Indian), Prof. Ezeka (Ibo), and, of course, Odenigbo and Olanna, who complete the group. Olanna has just got a job as instructor in sociology at Nsukka University.
Adichie's novel is set in a milieu of university intellectuals, and obviously it is important for her that Nigeria can boast this class of people. In all of the novels I have read you can sense this (defensive) stance or gesture: we don't hail from the bush, we are Nigerian intellectuals, we have academic degrees and titles, we are as civilized as you are. And of course, having characters of this kind allows the author to insert discussions about Nigeria's future on a high intellectual level.
Nevertheless, there is also this characteristic skepticism or ambivalence with regard to the role of the intellectual which I already noted in Ike's novel. Odenigbo, too, fails the test of faithful husband. He sleeps with a village girl that his mother has installed deliberately for the purpose of creating conflict between Odenigbo and Olanna. The girl gets pregnant, and 'Baby' is born, whom Olanna decides to raise as her own child.
Under the pressures of war, the relationship between Olanna and Odenigbo is put to a severe test: they have to leave Nsukka, the intellectual centre of the new-born state of Biafra, which is easily overrun by Nigerian troops, and move deeper into the interior of the Ibo heartland, to Umuahia, where Odenigbo works for the "Manpower Directorate" (232) and the "Agitator Corps" (328), at first with a lot of enthusiasm, but later more and more discouraged and disillusioned, so that he begins to take the little money that is left to the bar to spend it on cheap home-brewed gin.

When the war finally ends, there is not much left of the formerly proud "revolutionary". The family goes back to Nsukka and is stopped by Nigerian soldiers who can smell the intellectual in Odenigbo, although he has already taken off his glasses, well knowing that this is a Cain's mark in the eyes of the soldiers. Unfortunately, he has forgotten to exchange his car's Biafran number plates for Nigerian ones:

> "We will change it when we get to Nsukka," Odenigbo said. "Nsukka?" The officer straightened up and laughed. "Ah, Nsukka University. You are the ones who planned the rebellion with Ojukwu, you book people."
> Odenigbo said nothing, looking straight ahead. The officer yanked his door open with a sudden movement. "*Oya*! come out and carry some wood for us. Let's see how you can help a united Nigeria." (520)

Since Odenigbo is hesitant to undergo this ritual of degradation, the officer slaps him in the face repeatedly. Olanna feels obliged to step in. She picks up two planks and carries them as ordered to the house. In this way, she manages to save the situation, and they can continue on their journey to Nsukka. Of course the whole episode is strongly reminiscent of Christ carrying the cross up Mount Calvary. In this case, Christ is female, however.

Odenigbo's house is still standing, but sadly ravaged by the 'vandals', as the soldiers of the Nigerian army are called throughout the novel. The bathtub has been shat into, his books have been burned. So have most of his manuscripts:

> Master squatted beside him and began to search through the charred paper, muttering, "My research papers are all here, *nekene nke*, this is the one on my rank test for signal detection..." After a while, he sat down on the bare earth, his legs stretched in front of him, and Ugwu wished he had not; there was something so undignified, so unmasterly about it. (522)

Odenigbo, so it seems, is a theoretician who has failed to pass the "rank test for signal detection" himself in the course of this war. He has not detected the obvious writing on the wall and acted accordingly. The intellectual sitting in the dust before a heap of charred research papers symbolizes Adichie's stance towards the role of the male intellectual in her novel: The heroic deeds of the academic mind have been wiped out by the realities of war. The intellectual, however, still exists, and he may begin anew.

It is no small wonder that the last part of the book is related from Ugwu's perspective. While Richard's attempts at writing a book are all abandoned one after the other, the native Ugwu has been writing about the history of his country all the time. The only thing which is still missing is a title, which he finds in the end: Richard bequeaths it to

him because re realizes that he himself will not be able to use it: "The World Was Silent When We Died". In her novel *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Adichie has inserted short content summaries of a book that - as it turns out in the end - is being written by Ugwu, Odenigbo's village houseboy, whom he sends to school to receive an education.
Ugwu also writes about an episode that deeply traumatizes Olanna who, visiting her uncle and aunt, gets caught in the July pogroms in Kano in the north and barely escapes with her life. When she comes home, she has to be taken to bed because her legs begin to fail her. What brings her down are the atrocities she had to witness in Kano, the sight of the mutilated bodies of her beloved aunt and her uncle, and the head of a child in a calabash on the train carried by the child's mother:

> For the prologue, he recounts the story of the woman with the calabash. She sat on the floor of the train squashed between crying people, shouting people, praying people. 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.
> Olanna tells him this story and he notes the details. 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 braids falling across the dark-brown face, eyes completely wide, eerily open, a mouth in a small surprised O. (103f.)

This episode is referred to at least four more times in the novel, on page 188, 196, 399, and 435.
According to Freud, repetition compulsion is a psychological phenomenon characteristic of traumatized people who keep repeating the actions or keep referring to the events that caused their traumatization.[15] After her Kano adventure, Olanna suffers from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Her dark swoops, as she calls them, keep visiting her, and she is haunted by her memory of the head of the dead child in the calabash.
But this does not only apply to her but also to the other characters in the novel to whom she relates her story, and, I should like to add, to a certain extent to Adichie herself. It is interesting to note that Adichie has not invented this episode but makes use of a newspaper report by Colin Legum which appeared in the *Observer* on 16 October 1966: "A woman, mute and dazed, arrived back in her village after travelling for five days with

[15] Sigmund Freud first explained this idea in his essay "Erinnern, Wiederholen und Durcharbeiten" ('Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through', 1914.). He took it up again in "Jenseits des Lustprinzips", Engl., "Beyond the Pleasure Principle", in: *On Metapsychology*, ed. Angela Richards (Middlesex 1987), p. 282ff.

only a bowl in her lap. She held her child's head, which was severed before her eyes." (quoted after Forsyth, 75)

The mother stroking the calabash with the head of her dead child inside symbolizes the atrocities of the civil war and the human suffering that goes along with it. The womb-like calabash also symbolizes the short-lived and aborted state of Biafra. It is a strong picture that burns itself deeply into the mind of the reader. As such, it is itself traumatizing, and although we should like to shut our eyes to it, it follows us around, reminding us of our own guilt, for we were part of the world that was silent when they died. Adichie and the other writers with an academic education have not yet got over this communal trauma of the Ibo people. Writing about it is one way of relating to it. In this way, Biafra novels have made an important contribution to the founding of Nigeria's literature.[16]

[16] Cf. also Chidi Amuta, "The Nigerian Civil War and the Evolution of Nigerian Literature." Hal Wylie et al., eds. *Contemporary African Literature*. Washington: Three Continents P, 1981.

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