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The Trauma of Loss and the Loss of Self in Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*

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Abstract

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) dramatizes both traditional forms of gender discrimination and Western influences that precipitate the emotional and physical trauma suffered by its protagonist, Olanna Ozobia. Factors that assail Olanna and other African literary women are family loss and marital abandonment. While Adichie and other African authors critique these destructive pressures on women's dignity and very well-being, they also celebrate the ability of women to surmount violation and injustice. While females make essential contributions to the health of their communities, as Olanna repeatedly does in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, their own health is routinely undermined by contradictory and demeaning pressures and expectations. These norms of behavior may have an adverse impact on the psychic wholeness that the women naturally pursue and can result in depression and sometimes despair and pathology. Olanna's situation has its unique features, due in part to her experiences of the Nigerian Civil War, but we may discern in the family and societal ordeals that she faces, the depression they trigger, and the fortitude that enables her to survive and even lead, a vital bond with other women portrayed in African literature.

Keywords: African literature, postcoloniality, feminism, trauma.

Nigerian-born author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie considers in her second novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), the causes and manifestations of female emotional trauma. Such trauma is reflected not only in psychic disturbance, but also in bodily dysfunction. Multiple plot developments and the characters associated with them wreak havoc on the emotional, psychic, and, even physical life of

Olanna Ozobia, *Yellow Sun*'s thoughtful and resilient female protagonist. Through these developments Adichie draws attention to the ways in which social betrayals of healthy individuals produce physical as well as psychic morbidities. For numerous female characters in modern African literature, one consequence of emotional trauma is the severe deterioration of physical well-being. This pattern is discernible in the cases of such female characters as Nnu Ego in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) and Jacqueline Diack in Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* (1979). These characters, who in certain respects may be viewed as forebears of Olanna and in others are as distinct from her, are shaped and constrained by traditional codes of female conduct in African family structures that are transformed by the hegemonic influences of Western education and materialism. Both traditional forms of gender discrimination and such Western influences are general sources of the emotional and physical trauma suffered by diverse female characters. Prominent among the immediate factors that traumatize women in the literary context are family loss and marital abandonment. While various authors decry the varied assaults on women's dignity and their fundamental well-being, they also celebrate the capacity of many women to surmount violation and injustice.

Reflecting some of the continuities as well as differences between the earlier novels and *Yellow Sun* may help contextualize the subsequent discussion of Adichie's story. In *The Joys of Motherhood* Emecheta questions the actual benefit to women of a certain pact embedded in patriarchy. The pact demands, in effect, that a woman dutifully serve her husband and their children, and, in return, eventually enjoy reciprocated financial and emotional support from them. The malaise that afflicts Nnu Ego at the close of the novel and the accompanying deterioration of her sanity and physical strength derive in some measure from her violated trust that her husband and children would be close by and, at least in the case of the children, attend to her in later life after her many years of courageous self-sacrifice. The Westernised orientation and even location of her children contribute to this violated trust. For example, while Nnu Ego remains in Nigeria, one of her sons lives in the United States and another in Canada. Economic factors, including ones that drive children to places far from their parents, help explain how, to cite M.

Keith Booker, *The Joys of Motherhood* "suggests that the treatment of women as the mere property of men in traditional society is not necessarily overcome by modernisation" (88). According to Carole Boyce Davies, moreover, Nnu Ego's illness and death dramatize, "the tragedy of woman's existence when it remains circumscribed by motherhood alone" (253). The failure of Nnu Ego's family and society make good on the reward of family support and kindness that Nnu Ego anticipated as a return for her years of devotion to her husband and children though undermines her well-being. Nnu Ego's suffering derives not only from her lack of connection to her children, but also from the conduct of her polygamous and sometimes abusive second husband, Nnaife Owolum, who, like her first husband, Amatokwu, eventually abandons her. The emotional and physical abandonment of Nnu Ego by Nnaife and their children eventually brings about her downward slide into psychic disorientation and physical deterioration.

In Bâ's *So Long a Letter* the institutionalisation of Jacqueline Diack is evidently precipitated by the infidelity of her husband, Samba, a medical doctor. Jacqueline, from the Ivory Coast, lives in Senegal and "enjoyed life" (46), but Samba betrays his wife and seems oblivious to the denigration of Jacqueline and their children that his behavior entails. He "did not bother to hide his [sexual] adventures, respecting neither his wife nor his children" (44); Jacqueline begins to suffer both emotional and bodily disturbances as a result. She "complained," at one point, "of a disturbing lump in her chest, under her left breast; she said she had the impression that a sharp point had pierced her there and was cutting through her flesh right to her very bones" (44). In other words, the nexus of her physical pain is close to her heart. Jacqueline undergoes a battery of tests, but no physical pathology, such as cancer, is found. Her friends try "everything to draw this sister out of her private hell" (45), tranquilizers are ordered for her by more than one doctor, and she is given "a series of shock treatments," authorised by the head of the Neurology Department (47). This physician remarks to her that "the problem is that you are depressed, that is . . . not happy. You wish the conditions of life were different from what they are in reality, and this is what is torturing you" (47). The head of Neurology thus holds Jacqueline and her unrealistic outlook as responsible for her own torment. At the same

time, no evidence is given that this or any of the other doctors who treat Jacqueline ask what *she* thinks is causing her depression, and one may infer that they do not really want to know.

Both Nnu Ego and Jacqueline are at the mercy of a patriarchal power order that ultimately denies them their subjectivity and the kinds of personal fulfillment they previously and reasonably had expected that they could attain. These emotional privations become manifest in the symptoms of physical distress that overtake them. From Michel Foucault's perspective, "nothing is more material, physical, corporal than the exercise of power" (57-58). Power, according to Foucault, "reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives" (39). The exercise of power by previously mentioned characters and societal factors are largely beyond the ability of these women to alter. Consequently, they suffer from family losses – specifically, husbands and, in the case of Nnu Ego, children as well. For Nnu Ego these losses are fatal – despite the resilience and even heroism she displays in surmounting obstacles through much of her life; but Jacqueline manages to locate inner reserves of strength, partly in response to encouraging words from the Head of Neurology, to transcend her sorrow: "Jacqueline . . . had left the interview already half-cured. She knew the heart of her illness and would fight against it. She was morally uplifted. She had come a long way, had Jacqueline! . . . . [Her] ordeal [had a] happy ending" (47). A slight semantic contrast lies in this passage between "half-cured" and "knew the heart of her illness." May we locate in these two assessments of Jacqueline's condition a suggestion that the power to transcend depression lay essentially within Jacqueline's heart but that such power did not resolve another half of the reason that despair had overtaken her in the first place – namely, Samba's betrayal? In all events, Jacqueline's determination to free herself from prolonged morbidity evidently allows her to resume the "enjoy[ment] of life" (46).

Like Jacqueline and Nnu Ego, Olanna in *Half of a Yellow Sun* also is devastated by family losses. She is resilient and intelligent but, like Nnu Ego and Jacqueline, is afflicted by an undiagnosed malaise, one that stems from applications of male, and, to some extent, female power that are beyond her control. Because a large portion of the

novel is set during the Nigerian Civil War, also known as the Biafran War (1967-70), Olanna endures an array of war-related traumas and privations, yet remarkably she never suffers from those circumstances or an identifiable disease. Rather, she is laid low three times from emotional trauma, and in each case; arguably, the trauma involves forms of abandonment. In the first instance Olanna discovers that her partner and future husband, Odenigbo, has, while Olanna is away, cheated on her with Amala, the servant of his unnamed mother. This outcome has been plotted by the mother and results in Amala's pregnancy, another outcome the mother has sought. The second time that Olanna experiences trauma in the novel literally immobilizes her: her beloved aunt, uncle, and pregnant cousin are brutally murdered in one of the state-sponsored anti-Igbo pogroms in northern Nigeria that precipitate the war. Olanna suffers actual paralysis from this atrocity, which she may construe not merely as the horrific loss of deeply beloved family members, but also as the abandonment of her, her family, and her people by her nation, Nigeria. The third instance of Olanna's emotional desolation occurs when her twin sister, Kainene Ozobia, disappears near the end of the war after entering Federal Nigerian territory to obtain supplies for the refugee center that she directs. By the end of the novel Olanna has become enmeshed in forms of denial over this loss of her sister.

The empty space and silence that replace Kainene are made the more oppressive to Olanna, as well as to Kainene's partner, Richard, by the fact that, as Pauline Dodgson-Katiyo remarks, "there is no witness to Kainene's supposed death and, therefore, not even words on which to base a funeral" (122). Another reason that Kainene's disappearance overwhelms Olanna is that prior to and during the Biafran war she had endured a years-long period of estrangement from her twin, whom, as Dodgson-Katiyo observes, Olanna felt was the "missing part of herself" (120). The sisters end their silence – which ensued from Olanna's betrayal of Kainene, a response to Odenigbo's betrayal of her [Olanna] – and reconcile partly due to the transformative consequences of war. But now, after her sister's disappearance, "Olanna is," in Dodgson-Katiyo's words, "unable to accept that she has lost Kainene" (122).

Previously Olanna was unsettled by the potentially impenetrable silence of death as she recalled her aunt, who, with other members of

the aunt's family, had been murdered in the anti-Igbo Northern pogroms that helped precipitate the Biafran war: "Perhaps Aunty Ifeka could see this [pro-Biafra] rally now, and all the people here, or perhaps not, if death was a silent opaqueness. Olanna shook her head, to shake away the thoughts. . ." (205). The disappearance of Kainene at the end of the war reinforces for Olanna the dread of this kind of mortal silence. In addition, the disappearance, forces on Olanna the renewal of wordlessness from Kainene, whose silence during their years of estrangement contribute to Olanna's recurring depression.

Dodgson-Katiyo elucidates Olanna's depression partly through reference to Freud and the concept of melancholy:

> Before, during and after the war, Olanna shows signs of melancholia. The psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud in his essay "Mourning and Melancholia" distinguishes between these two conditions, describing mourning as a "normal" state that will end after a period time and melancholia as pathological, in illness with no clearly defined end. . .. Both mourning and melancholia are centrally concerned with loss of a loved person or a loved object (such as one's country) or an ideal (such as liberty). Nevertheless, Olanna' experiences suggest that she suffers from some of the symptoms of depression that Freud describes as melancholia. (117-18).

While elements of depression or melancholy periodically overtake Olanna in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, she has her own term for her sadness and shock, as if there is no old or new clinical phrase that captures it. That term is "Dark Swoops" (156-58), and the first time the Dark Swoops afflict her, after the murder of her aunt and other beloved family members in northern Nigeria, she loses the ability to walk and take care of herself. The event and the symptoms resonate with the Mariama Bâ's description in *So Long a Letter* of a nervous breakdown and its devastation, despite medical authority's tendency to dismiss it:

> Oh, nervous breakdown! Doctors speak of it in a detached, ironical way, emphasizing that the vital organs are in no way disturbed. You are lucky if they don't tell you that you are wasting their time with the ever-growing list of your illnesses – your head, throat, chest, heart, liver – that no X-ray can confirm. And yet what atrocious suffering is caused by nervous breakdowns! (43)

Olanna's symptoms also remind us of one's temporarily exhibited by Tambu, Tsitsi Dangarembga's narrator in *Nervous Conditions* (1988), who, in her abhorrence over the prospective Christian wedding of her parents, already married by virtue of a traditional Shona ceremony, "could not get out of bed . . . [her] muscles simply refus[ing] to obey" (168).

While Olanna, then, does suffer profoundly from the sense of abandonment by the man she loves and the loss of her twin, it is the murder of her family members in a state-sponsored action that paralyzes her. In Olanna's private experience of these murders, of their raw cruelty, she experiences a dimension of life that she had not known and abandonment by the world she thought she did know. Without that world she temporary loses parts of herself. In *Yellow Sun* as a whole, moreover, Olanna's sense of abandonment due to absence and infidelity disturbs her emotional and even physical wholeness.

Adichie as well as numerous African female authors have sought to identify the larger social, political, and economic conditions that produce psychic and physical disturbances in women. These authors repeatedly show that the more immediate causes of women's mental and physical illnesses are estrangement from loved ones and feelings of emotional rejection and worthlessness. Female characters endure acute symptoms of distress that, as with Olanna, persist for protracted periods. In a number of cases these disturbances are not clinically identified, yet they can immobilize women, as when her "dark swoops" overtake Olanna.

Paradoxically, though, the foregrounding of feminine physical and emotional distress in African literary works indirectly emphasizes the vital importance of women to the well-being of the African communities portrayed and to these societies' potential to flourish over time. So, while it is true that Olanna suffers from the losses occasioned by marital infidelity and war, it also is true that she manages to retain her composure and help sustain her family and the communities to which she belongs. Her strength and courage are evident, moreover, when, in the immediate aftermath of the civil war, she performs arduous labor demanded by Federal Nigerian soldiers and fends off being violated by one of them:

> Then she walked to the pile of wood planks and picked two up. At first, she staggered under the weight – she had not expected that they would be so heavy – then she steadied herself and began to walk up to the house. She was sweating when she came down. She noticed the hard eyes of a soldier following her, burning through her clothes. On her second trip up, he had come closer to stand by the pile.
>
> Olanna looked at him and then called, "Officer!"
> The officer had just waved a car on. He turned. What is it?"
>
> "You had better tell your boy here that it be better for him not to even think about touching me," Olanna said. (521)

Olanna's "boldness" at this tense moment (521), when she and her family are at the mercy of angry and physically violent Nigerian soldiers, almost certainly spares her from being raped by the soldier who closes in on her. Her faltering denial of Kainene's loss, notwithstanding, Olanna remains before, during, and after this scene the central moral force of her family.

A central tension thus emerges in the cumulative portrayal of women in a range of African novels: while females make essential, life-giving contributions to the health of their communities, as Olanna repeatedly does in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, their own well-being is routinely diminished by contradictory and degrading forces imposed upon them. This tension may fracture the psychic wholeness that the women naturally seek: "in many novels by African women . . . a woman is . . . divided against herself: she loves to serve her family and society but often finds that her service denies her basic humanity as much as it supports and develops it" (Davies and Fido 324). This is the kind of double-bind that breed depression, and sometimes despair and pathology in women portrayed in African fiction. And while Olanna's case has its unique features, due in part to her personal experiences of war and betrayal, we may discern in her losses, the depression they trigger, and the fortitude that enables her to survive and even lead, a bond of kinship with other African female characters.

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