

The Aftermath of Trauma:
Postmemory in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*



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Introduction

“Remembering is a realization of belonging, even a social obligation. One has to remember in order to belong.”

- Jan Assmann, “Communicative and Cultural Memory”

Forming a sense of self can be a complicated process, which is influenced by individual and collective power structures and discourses. Memory plays an important role in this process of identity-formation as it facilitates an understanding of one’s selfhood. Jan Assmann is a German Egyptologist, whose work has been focused around the theory of collective and communicative memory, which he developed with his wife, Aleida Assmann. Jan Assmann discusses the interdependent relation of memory, identity and time in his work. By focusing on the concept of collective memory, Assmann sheds light on the effects of memory on the human self and the situational- and generational-transcendent character of memory (“Communicative” 109). He distinguishes between different ways of remembering and emphasizes that these “*modi memorandi*” can be transferred from one generation to another and from one situation to another (Assmann, “Communicative” 111). Personal memory, then, is closely interlinked with collective memory, for both forms of memory are in constant contact with each other. A sense of self, then, is also closely related to a sense of ‘us’, as collective memory influences individual memory and vice versa. The different memory structures intersect because people are in continuous interaction with other people. Moreover, cultural or historical events can heavily influence both collective as personal remembrance. Collective traumatic events, such as the Holocaust, can have a pervasive impact on people, their identities and their memories. Years after such a traumatic event has ended, the memories can still live on. Traumatic historical events can have a pervasive impact on people and the reworking of trauma can still influence people’s lives even if they have not physically experienced the event. Concomitantly, different forms of belated memory are widely discussed by several academics, but the most notable discussion is that of postmemory, a concept introduced by Marianne Hirsch.

A novel that delves into the trauma of the Biafran War and the relation of this trauma to collective and personal memory is *Half of Yellow Sun*. The Nigerian author, Chimamanda Adichie addresses the traumatic past of her parents during the Biafran War in this novel. I will try to form an understanding of the ways in which *Half of a Yellow Sun* adheres to, or

sometimes rejects, postmemory by focusing on Hirsch's theory and the critique on her theory.

Hirsch explores the aftermath of trauma in her work, under the denominator of postmemory. She coined the term postmemory, which "describes the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right" ("The Generation" 103). Thus, postmemory is different from history as it is characterized by a deep personal connection with the historical events by the second generation. Moreover, it discerns itself from memory as postmemory is marked by generational difference; the second generation does not literally remember the traumatic events as they have not experienced it themselves. The term second generation is rather limited, as many generations after the traumatic events can have a deep personal connection with the source of trauma. Therefore, the second and later generations are also known as the postgeneration (Hirsch, *Writing and Visual* 3). The postgeneration are descendants of survivors of large traumatic events. Members of the postgeneration can have a strong connection with the memories of their parents and ancestors. It is noteworthy that postgenerations have not actually witnessed the large traumatic event that they connect so deeply with. Nevertheless, the memories of the eyewitnesses of the first generation are powerfully transferred to later generations by for example, stories and rituals. Consequently, members of the postgeneration identify with the past of their ancestors to such an extent that they interpellate these memories as their own (Hirsch, *Writing and Visual* 3). Simultaneously, the postgeneration acknowledges its distance to the memories of its forebears and recognizes the difference between their postmemories and the actual memories of their older family members. The traditional definition of memory, then, deviates from the postmemory of the postgeneration.

As will be discussed in depth later on, the aftermath of trauma can be acted out by postmemorial acts of creation. These postmemorial acts of creation can take up different forms, such as literature or photographs. Hirsch has analyzed several postmemorial works in relation to the belated traumatic effects of the Holocaust. Remembrance plays an important role in dealing with past traumatic events and postmemorial acts of creation assist this process of mental healing. In Hirsch's viewpoint, postmemory can help people to come to terms with a traumatic past, even if people have not witnessed the trauma themselves, it can still have a pervasive impact on their sense of self. Many academics have written about the traumatic consequences of the Holocaust. It goes without saying that the Holocaust is internationally acknowledged as a traumatic historical event that is remembered both collectively as

personally by different rites and stories. Consequently, it would be suitable to analyze the belated traumatic effects of the Holocaust with help of postmemory theory. In this light, the concept of postmemory in relation to the Holocaust has been widely explored by many academics. However, the question arises whether postmemory is merely applicable in the Holocaust context or if it is possible to apply it to other traumatic contexts. Although Hirsch claims that postmemory can be applied to many traumatic historical events – such as slavery or the Vietnam War – it is not extensively researched outside of the scope of the Holocaust. Therefore, it would be valuable to analyze works that can be seen as examples of postmemory outside of the scope of the Holocaust.

It is useful to expatiate on several critical remarks on postmemory before analyzing the workings of postmemory in contexts other than the Holocaust. Critics of Hirsch's theory feel that the wide application of postmemory is highly problematic. J.J. Long is one of these critics and offers criticism on postmemory theory as he claims that it falls short on certain areas. Most importantly, Long states that postmemory theory neglects the traumatic experience of the first generation. In Long's viewpoint, postmemory takes away from the experiences of the eyewitnesses of trauma. Simultaneously, postmemory replaces the memories of the deemed postgeneration with memories that are not their own. This could severely influence the sense of self of both the first generations and the postgenerations of traumatic historical events. Although Hirsch's theory has been often referred to in analyses of trauma and remembrance, Long feels that postmemory is more often than not unfit to be used as an analytical or descriptive tool (148). He says that it is unlikely to put oneself in another's place without replacing them (Long 162). Long strongly states that many problems arise when trying to apply postmemory to different situations and he supports his remarks by analyzing a text that is often seen as a postmemorial act of creation, *Pawels Briefe* by Monika Maron. Although Long admits that the novel portrays certain characteristics of postmemory, he still largely argues that it would be wrong to apply postmemory without challenging the theory. It is noteworthy that Long does not intend to dismiss the notion of postmemory, but he is highly critical of the wide application of the concept without critical assessment.

According to Hirsch, traumatic memories can be transmitted to different situations and generations by postmemorial acts of creation. An example of such an act of creation is literature, which is the focus of this text. Thus, the intersection of history, fiction and (collective) memory is highly palpable in this discussion. In analyses of postmemory as an inclusive concept the question remains whether it can actually be used in contexts outside of the Holocaust. To answer this question it would be beneficial to analyze postmemory in a

non-Western context. An example of trauma in a non-Western context is that of the Nigeria-Biafra War from 1967-1970. The Nigerian Civil War can be seen as a traumatic historical event that has impacted many lives, even after the war has ended. Nigerian culture and society has been influenced by British colonialism and the aftereffects of civil war. The Nigerian author, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie touches upon these sensitive topics in her work. Adichie addresses both her personal and cultural history in her work. She was born after the era of British colonialism and after the end of the civil war, yet her novel is a way of connecting with the horrors of the past and transmitting this onto others of her generation. Thus, Adichie, in Hirsch's terms, is a member of the postgeneration. Adichie lends herself to intersectional analyses of memory, history and fiction because she incorporates the complexities of postmemory in her work.

Fiction, history and memory are heavily intersected in her novel *Half of a Yellow Sun*. The novel is about the emergence and development of the Biafran war in Nigeria. Three protagonists who experience the atrocities of the war first handedly narrate the events in the novel. This is specifically interesting, as Adichie has not experienced the war herself. Nevertheless, the novel vividly describes the memories of the Nigeria-Biafra war and can be seen as an act of remembrance. Interestingly, Adichie feels a deep connection to the events of the Biafra war and this is also palpable in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. She strongly connects to the memories that her parents and grandparents have to the war. The oral tradition in Nigerian culture plays an important role in the transmittance of memories onto later generations. Adichie has often expressed that the stories of her parents have influenced her way of seeing the world and the connection that she feels to the traumatic past of Nigeria. Adichie still feels the effects of the war and colonialism in Nigerian society and she felt the need to address these issues in her literature. This brings postmemory to mind and the manner in which *Half of a Yellow Sun* can be seen as a postmemorial project in the perimeters of Hirsch's theory. Thus, in this case study, postmemory will be analyzed by focusing on Adichie as a member of the postgeneration.

Works of art, such as literature, poetry, paintings and photographs can be powerful mediums through which traumatic pasts can be addressed. Hirsch's book *The Generation Of Postmemory* focuses on photographs as mediums through which postmemory can be expressed. However, literature, and novels in particular, can be powerful tools of communication as well. In this light, it can be argued that *Half of a Yellow Sun* is a strong example of postmemory as Adichie is describing the traumatic events of the civil war without having experienced them herself. It is important to critically distinguish the Nigerian context

from the relation of Hirsch's theory to the Holocaust. In light of Long's arguments, it will be necessary to emphasize the sensibilities and specificities of the Nigerian context and the role that Adichie plays in this. From the perspective of postmemory as formulated in the work of Hirsch, I will seek an understanding of the applicability of postmemory in an African context. For an inclusive analysis of the applicability of postmemory in Adichie's novel it is important to analyze both the book and the author together. By focusing on what both the author and the novel say about the Biafran war, it will become clear how postmemory tries to reconnect with the past and collective memory through means of literature. Instead of focusing on the effects of postmemorial acts of creation on post-traumatic society, it is more useful to analyze the postmemorial process of Adichie's novel by looking at the strategy and the intentions of the author. To come to a conclusion it is important to elaborate on the theories of collective memory and postmemory introduced above, which will be done in the first chapter. Secondly, a historical background in chapter two will give insight into the trauma of the Biafran War and Adichie's personal history, which led her to write *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Lastly, an analysis will follow in chapter three, which will focus on the manners in which Adichie and her novel are placed in the Hirsch versus Long debate.

1. Theoretical Framework

“My father bleeds history”

- Art Spiegelman, *Maus*

1.1 History of Trauma Theory

Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus* is about the experiences of his father, a Polish Jew who survived the Holocaust. Throughout the novel it becomes clear that war has had powerful consequences on different generations in Spiegelman's family. The effects of trauma, and war in particular, have sparked a rise in theoretical and ethical discussion on the interdependent relationship of trauma, memory and, in Hirsch's words, “intergenerational acts of transfer” (*Writing and Visual* 2). It is no surprise then, that the concept of trauma has such a wide scope in various scientific fields besides literature research, as its impact on people's lives is vast. Trauma studies date back to the early twentieth century and made a revival in the nineties of that century¹. At that time, trauma studies focused on the long-term, psychological effects of the Holocaust as a traumatic experience. Related to this, the concept of memory began to rise up in this area of study. The relationship between history and memory is a complicated one, especially when collective and personal memories intersect.

Before moving on to the intersection of different forms of memories it is important to elaborate on the term trauma and the way it transformed from a purely medical concept to a hybrid concept that can possess both physical as psychological tendencies. In the etymological sense, trauma derives from the Ancient Greek word *τραῦμα* (trauma), which means wound or damage. Later on, trauma began to exemplify the long-lasting psychological effects of harmful experiences. The damage that has been done by traumatic experiences creates an open wound in the mental health of a person. Traumatic historical events became interesting for people studying the human psyche. In the twentieth century, the psychological effects of the Holocaust mainly characterized trauma theory. The idea emerged that severely negative experiences, such as a war, can lead to “late, protracted and even permanent mental and physical health damage” (Withuis 1). In their edited book *The Politics of War Trauma*, Jolande Withuis and Annet Mooij discuss the traumatic effects that World War II has had on different

¹ Jolande Withuis discusses the historical development of trauma studies in relation to World War II in the introduction to her co-authored book *The Politics of War Trauma: The Aftermath of World War II*

European cultures and the different ways in which people treat and deal with the trauma of war. In relation to this, Withuis discusses the “late consequences” of World War II: “[i]t became clear that although this war had been over for more than a quarter of a century, camp survivors, resistance fighters and other victims still often suffered depressing and invalidating symptoms” (2). Trauma, then, comes to mean much more than a physical injury. Rather, trauma, especially in cases of war, can have long-term psychological effects on its survivors. The idea that mentally stable adults would not be mentally affected by trauma lost ground in academic fields and chronic mental disorders were acknowledged as an effect of war (Withuis 1). Consequently, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) was recognized as a serious illness by 1980 (Withuis 2).² Thus, the implications of war can have extensive, traumatizing effects on its survivors.

It has to be noted that PTSD cannot be equated with postmemory. The experiences and memories of witnesses of trauma are inherently different from those of later generations. It would be highly unethical to liken the memories of the first generation with the imagined memories of the later generations. Nevertheless, we have seen that war is an extremely traumatizing experience for many people and generations. The memories of these traumatic events can be so vividly transferred to later generations in a way that makes war relatable, even for people who have not experienced it first handedly. Especially in societies where the aftermath of war is still present, younger generation can connect to the experiences of their parents. For example, the Holocaust is often identified with an exceptional status of trauma and remembrance and much of trauma theory has been focused on the reworking of the Holocaust trauma in the present. The implementation of trauma research can be widely applied to traumatic, historical events other than the Holocaust. It would be wrong to compare World War II with the Biafran War. Yet, the implications of civil war can be analyzed in the Nigerian context as well. This being said, it is important to focus on the nuances of every particular traumatic event and emphasize the ethical relationship between trauma and postmemorial acts of remembrance. To further explain how trauma symptoms can be transferred from the witnesses to later generations, it is useful to look at the complicated yet crucial relationship between collective memory and personal memory.

² Withuis explains that the diagnosis of PTSD requires the following three symptoms, which have to be present over a longer period of time: “intrusive flashbacks; avoidance of situations and emotions associated with the war; and a persistent state of physical hyperarousal” (“Introduction” 2).

1.2 Collective and Personal Memory

An understanding of the perimeters of transmission between collective and personal memory is required to fully grasp the reasoning of postmemory. An inclusive analysis of the interdependent relationship of collective and personal memory helps “to specify how the break in transmission resulting from traumatic historical events necessitates forms of remembrance that reconnect and re-embody an intergenerational memorial fabric that is severed by catastrophe” (Hirsch, *Writing and Visual* 32). The relationship between personal memory and collective memory has always been an interesting but complex one. The interdependent character of this relationship is important in the study of postmemory. As early as 1997 Jan Assmann discusses his theory on collective remembrance in his book *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*. His theory on collective remembrance would form the foundation of all his individual work and the works that he has published with his wife, Aleida Assmann.

Drawing on the work from Aby Warburg³ and Maurice Halbwachs⁴, Jan Assmann distinguishes between two kinds of collective remembrance, namely communicative memory and cultural memory. Cultural memory is an institutionalized form of memory; it is shared by a group of people who identify with the same cultural identity (Assmann, “Communicative” 110). Assmann argues that our memories exist not only in interaction with other human beings but with external symbols as well, which helps to transmit memories across different generations and situations. He says: “in order to be able to be reembodied [sic] in the sequence of generations, cultural memory, unlike communicative memory, exists also in disembodied form and requires institutions of preservation and reembodiment [sic]” (Assmann, “Communicative” 111). Cultural memory, then, is a form of collective memory that is archived in outward symbols or institutions, such as libraries, monuments or museums. Communicative memory, on the other hand, does not have this institutional character. Rather, it is formalized by daily interaction and communication. Due to its non-institutionalized character communicative memory has a relatively short time depth: not more than eighty to hundred years. This is normally the time span of three generations, but Assmann concedes that the durability of (communicative) memories depends on the strength of social ties and

³ Aby Warburg was an art historian who moved beyond the bounds of personal memory and coined the term “social memory”, in which cultural objectifications are seen as carriers of memory (Assmann, “Communicative” 110).

⁴ Maurice Halbwachs was a French sociologist whose research focused on collective memory. Halbwachs proved that memory can be analyzed in a social context and that it is dependent on socialization and communication (Assmann, “Communicative” 109).

frames. The family plays an important role in this, which will be further exemplified by the work of Aleida Assmann.

Aleida Assmann elaborates on Jan's work by naming four different forms of memory: individual memory, social memory, political memory, and cultural memory (Assmann, "Transformations" 55). The first two forms of memory correlate with Jan Assmann's communicative remembrance, whereas the final two forms align with his discussion of cultural memory. Focusing on individual and social memory, Aleida Assmann maintains the idea that memories are linked between different individuals, and by talking about these memories they can be passed from one person to another and eventually be written down. Individuals can share their experiences with others and form these memories into media of transmissions that will help to make sense of their trauma. For Aleida Assmann the family plays an important role in this. The familial transfer of memories is intergenerational, which will be shown in Adichie's case, as she learns from the Biafran experience through her parents and older family members. Contrarily, political and cultural memory are transgenerational: "[political and cultural memory] are grounded on the more durable carriers of external symbols and representations" (Assmann, "Transformations" 55). These symbolic systems correspond to Hirsch's use of imaginative acts of creation. However, Hirsch focuses more on personally created *modi memorandi*, such as novels or pictures, whereas Aleida Assmann bases her research on various forms of memory-transmitters, which can vary from memories that are written down to memories that are incorporated in national institutions. Related to this is the intersection of history and memory. It is important to remember that objective historical truth is not the same thing as memory. Nevertheless, the representation of memories in everyday communication and institutionalized objects has an effect on both the objective truth of the historian and the subjective truth of the individual (Assmann, "Transformations" 53). Thus, history and memory may be heavily intersected in practice, which will be exemplified by Adichie's novel.

1.3 The Concept of Postmemory

Drawing on personal experiences and the theories of Jan and Aleida Assmann, Marianne Hirsch has coined the term postmemory in the early 1990s. Postmemory describes the complicated relationship that the generation born after a traumatic event has to the collective or cultural traumatic experiences. In Hirsch's viewpoint, the experiences of those who witnessed the collective trauma are so deeply integrated in the lives of their children and grandchildren, also known as the postgeneration ("The Generation" 106). As Hirsch says:

“postmemory is not identical to memory: it is ‘post’; but, at the same time, [...] it approximates memory in its affective force and its psychic effects” (*Writing and Visual* 31). The memories of the firsthand witnesses (or the first generation) are transmitted to later generations by means of stories, art, literature, culture and behaviors (“The Generation” 106). There is a clear distinction between the memories of the first generation and the ‘postmemories’ of their descendants. As Hirsch states: “these experiences [of collective trauma] were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to *seem* to constitute memories in their own right. Postmemory’s connection to the past is thus not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation” (“The Generation” 106-107). Thus, the second and later generations have to recognize the temporal distance between their deemed memories and the actual traumatic event.

Hirsch calls the descendants of witnesses of collective trauma “the postgeneration”. The postgeneration includes the people whose parents or grandparents have lived through a collective traumatic event and whose experiences have been passed through to their children and grandchildren. As Hirsch explains it the members of the postgeneration are not only heirs to their genetic characteristics but also to the traumatic experiences of their forbearers. The postgeneration can connect so deeply to the previous generation’s remembrance of the past that they need to call that connection *memory* and thus that, in certain extreme circumstances, memory *can* be transmitted to those who were not actually there to live an event” (Hirsch, “The Generation” 105-106). The postgeneration, then, has no lived experience of the traumatic events. Thus, the memories of the members of the postgeneration are entirely different from those of the firsthand witnesses. Having said that, the postmemories can still feel extremely real and have tangible effects on the descendants of the actual trauma.

In addition, the “post” in postmemory entails more than a temporal or generational difference. Similar to the “post” in postcolonial or postmodern it necessitates a deep connection with the past rather than a detachment from it. As has been discussed before, trauma can have a belated effect on people; this goes for both first hand witnesses as the postgenerations. For example, the effects of the Holocaust on a Jewish survivor do not have to show until years after the war has ended. Similarly, the stories and behavioral traits of Holocaust survivors can have a belated traumatic effect on their descendants. The “post” in postmemory, then, is characterized by its belatedness in time, but, more importantly, underlines the aftereffects and continuing ramifications of trauma. Arguably, remembering the past in creative ways, such as literature, helps to make sense of the present. Hirsch says the following on this: “[p]ostmemory [makes] a particular end-of-century/turn-of-century

moment of looking backward rather than ahead and [defines] the present in relation to a troubled past rather than initiating new paradigms” (“The Generation” 106). This means that there is a complex relationship of continuation and rupture between trauma and memory. Nevertheless, in Hirsch’s words, postmemory is “a *structure* of inter- and trans-generational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience. It is a *consequence* of traumatic recall but (unlike post-traumatic stress disorder) at a generational remove” (“The Generation” 106).

Thus, Hirsch emphasizes that postmemory is not similar to the conventional meaning of memory. Rather, postmemory include the memories that are passed down through pictures, literature and behavior. Collective memory plays a role in this, but the role of the family is emphasized in postmemory theory, which will be exemplified by the analysis of Adichie’s personal connection to the postgeneration. The family plays an important role in the complex relationship between collective and personal memory, especially in the postmemorial context. Both Hirsch and Aleida Assmann insist on the family as an important medium of memorial transmission. With this, Hirsch takes up a familial gaze and she distinguishes between “familial” and “affiliative” postmemory in her work (“The Generation” 114-115). While “the former describes the [vertical] transmission of traumatic events directly from forebears to descendants, the latter entails a horizontal transmission from the descendants to those of their generation who seek connection to past events” (Syrkin). Consequently, affiliative postmemory helps members of the postgeneration connect with other members of the same postgeneration. In addition to this it is important to distinguish the postgeneration from the literal second generation. Hirsch explains this distinction as follows: “this process of identification, imagination, and projection [i.e. postmemory] [is] radically different for those who grew up in survivor families [the postgeneration] and for those less proximate members of their generation or relational network who share a legacy of trauma [*literal* second generation]” (“The Generation” 114). Thus, members of the postgeneration can make members of the literal second generation more aware of their postmemories and the memories of their descendants by means of affiliative postmemory. Affiliative postmemory can take form in different objects, such as photographs, paintings or poetry. However, the main focus now lies on literature as a form of affiliative postmemory in general, and Adichie’s novel specifically.

It becomes clear in the works of Jan and Aleida Assmann and Hirsch that archival memory is crucial in the transmission of memory. Hirsch underlines the several different media of transmission. These media are imaginative acts of creation that reinforce the memory of a traumatic event and eventually help people to cope with trauma. It is important to emphasize the act of creation as it helps to make sense of the past, which is the ultimate

goal of postmemory. Postmemory is mediated not by a recollection of the past, but – in adherence with Jan and Aleida Assmann’s theory on institutionalized archival memory – by imaginative projection and creation. Theodor Adorno had already encouraged the healing effects of the act of creation, such as that of poetry after Auschwitz (Hirsch, “The Generation” 105). However, there are other creative genres that can be seen as forms of transmission that support the claims of postmemory. Literature, pictures and artworks can all be forms of medial transmission. Postmemory helps to create a memory where it cannot recover an actual memory; the creative act helps to recall trauma and deal with the psychological after-effects of that particular trauma. The role of literature in the processing of trauma is buttressed as it actively transmits postmemories between members of the postgeneration and other members of that society. Fiction is not history but it can be a form of memory. Literature can help to re-embodiment and to re-individualize memories, especially traumatic memories that have had a pervasive impact on many generations. Literature enables people to make sense of an irretrievable past, even after all the survivors have passed on. Postmemorial literature, such as Adichie’s novel, does not only give shape to traumatic (post)memories, it also outlives the owners of those memories. Memory, then, is not merely over with the passing of a generation, rather, it continues to shape a society and its subjects with help of literature.

1.4 Criticism on Postmemory

Having clarified the theory and scope of postmemory, there still remain some unanswered questions and points of critique on the concept. Even Hirsch herself acknowledges the problems that may arise when using postmemory as an analytical tool: “[t]o grow up with such overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that preceded one’s birth or one’s consciousness, is to risk having one’s own stories and experiences displaced, even evacuated, by those of a previous generation” (“The Generation” 107). However, Hirsch argues that these traumatic events have such a continuing influence on the present that they cannot be ignored. The contradictory character of postmemory is inevitable and inherent to its reworking in trauma and literature studies in Hirsch’s viewpoint. Professor J.J. Long goes against Hirsch’s ideas on postmemory, and the applicability thereof, in his essay ‘Monika Maron's *Pawels Briefe*: Photography, Narrative, And The Claims Of Postmemory’. Long claims that postmemory is nothing more than a “radically overdetermined concept” (151). In Long’s viewpoint, Hirsch replaces the memories of the first generation by claiming that the postgeneration can strongly identify with the memories of their ancestors. Long reinforces his argument by focusing on the following words by Hirsch: “perhaps it is *only* in subsequent

generations that trauma can be witnessed and worked through, by those who were not there to live it but who received its effects, belatedly, through the narratives, actions, and symptoms of the previous generation” (Hirsch quoted in Long 149). Thus, Long states that postmemory bestows too much authority upon the postgeneration, especially because the postgeneration has not actually lived through the traumatic experiences. This shift of “epistemological authority” from the first generation to the second belittles the experiences of the first generation while simultaneously “hollowing out [...] the subjectivity of the second generation and replacing it with the effects of the previous generation’s trauma” (Long 149). By arguing this, Long undermines the deemed ethical character of postmemorial acts of creation. Postmemorial works, and postmemory in general, can sabotage the ethical reflection that is so inherent to remembering the past in order to cope with trauma. Long states that postmemorial subjects, such as Adichie, can be so dominated by a traumatic past they never actually experienced, that they fail to succeed to grasp the nuances of history versus memory. Contrarily, Hirsch is fully aware of the role that the members of the postgeneration play and she argues for a framework in which the sensibilities of the first generation are taken into account. She states multiple times that the memories of the postgeneration are completely different to those of the first generations. Furthermore, Hirsch also argues that the memories of the postgeneration should not be regarded as similar to those of the first generation and the postmemorial memories are not to be confused with the traditional meaning of memory.

Another point of criticism by Long is his argument that postmemory cannot be universally applied, as Hirsch likes to argue. In Long’s view, using postmemory with a one-size-fits-all-approach would be erroneous and would diminish the healing effects of postmemorial remembrance. He claims that the theory of postmemory has travelled across different disciplines and national contexts, but, in Long’s words, “amid this global flow of theory, we need the concrete engagement with specific texts to keep us alert to cultural specificity at a time when such specificity is often elided by the traveling concepts of the humanities” (161). Thus, Long does not necessarily state that it would be problematic to utilize postmemory as an analytical tool outside of the scope of the Holocaust. However, he argues that “[t]he universal availability of the postmemorial position carries the potential for distinctly unethical exploitation. Inscribing another’s life story into one’s own biography is by no means necessarily ethical” (Long 149). Thus, Long’s argument has mainly a moralistic character, as he states that critics should not assume that postmemory works the same in every case of (after-)trauma. Moreover, Long says that the immoral character of postmemory can come to the fore when ignoring the specificities of each traumatic case. To strengthen his

argument, Long refers to Edward Said's discussion of critical consciousness, in which "it is the critic's job to challenge theory" (Long 148). Postmemory, then, "must be tested critically against texts that fall just outside its immediate purview" (Long 148). However, Long is not entirely clear on what kind of texts or authors do not meet the requirements of postmemory. It becomes clear, then, that Long bases this argument mainly on what he deems ethical in the discussion of the aftermath of trauma.

Contrary to Long's moralistic statement, Hirsch argues that postmemory can be reapplied to different traumatic experiences without losing sight of the moral value of memory: "I propose to use the Holocaust as my historical frame of reference, but my analysis relies on and, I believe, is relevant to numerous other contexts of traumatic transfer that can be understood as postmemory" ("The Generation" 108). Hirsch goes on and argues that other contexts can benefit from the study of intergenerational transmission, such as the trauma study of American slavery, the South African Apartheid and the Vietnam War, all traumatic events in their own right. Be that as it may, it would be wrong to simply apply postmemory to Adichie's novel without looking at the specificities of the context in which the novel is created, as Long has argued. Therefore, it is important to discern the nuances of every single case study. Postmemory in the postgeneration of the Holocaust can take other forms than postmemory in the postgeneration of the Nigeria-Biafra War. For example, *Maus* by Art Spiegelman is a completely different form of postmemorial act of creation than *Half of a Yellow Sun*; every culture has its own ways and rites in their remembrance of collective trauma. Thus, following Long's moralistic point, it is indeed wrong to simply apply Hirsch's concept of postmemory on the Nigerian case, but it can nevertheless still be used as an analytical tool in Adichie's case. However, as Long emphasizes as well, it is crucial to discern the cultural, political and historical context of the novel before applying postmemory to it. Adichie's novel certainly exemplifies certain postmemorial qualities. However, it also challenges Hirsch's theory to a certain extent. It is important to emphasize this in order to come to a new framework of postmemory theory, which will be more applicable in the Nigerian historical context of the novel.

Moreover, Long questions the deemed ethical relation between the act of creation and postmemory. He states: "[i]magination and creation, after all, contain the possibility of unregulated fantasy that need pay no attention at all either to historical accuracy or to the otherness of the other. The question is: how can this imaginative investment and creation be policed in order to prevent appropriation or even usurpation of the other's experience?" (Long 150). Interestingly so, Hirsch asks the same question as well and emphasizes the importance

of the ethical relation between imaginative acts of creation and postmemorial healing. Of course Long's argument has truth in it as he pinpoints the sensibilities that come with trauma and memory. Nevertheless, in the case of *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Adichie never claims to speak factual truth. Rather, she states that there is a difference between history and fiction, and this does not have to necessarily make her postmemorial act of creation less valuable.

One solution that Hirsch mentions to Long's claims is the necessity of documentation and the role that textual mediation plays in postmemorial acts of remembrance. Relying on pictures, documents, and stories memories are passed down from one generation to the other. Nonetheless, Long remains skeptical and argues that textual mediation cannot grant postmemory enough legitimation, especially when taking into account "the selective and partial nature of memory" (Long 150). Moreover, Long accurately mentions the high possibility of incredibility in imaginative works of creation as they can be manipulated and falsely presented. This is entirely true, but postmemorial works do not claim to represent factual history. Rather, as Hirsch argues, they may have a psychologically healing effect on members of the postgeneration who identify with the narrative that is presented in such a postmemorial act of creation. In this light, Hirsch mentions "heteropathic identification" as a solution towards Long's claims (quoted in Long 150). Heteropathic identification is "a non-appropriative mode of identification that allows one to say, 'it could have been me; it was me, also' and, at the same time, 'but it was not me'" (Long 150). This exemplifies the ethical character of postmemorial identification, yet, Long is not convinced. What Long forgets, however, is that true postmemorial acts of creation, such as *Half of a Yellow Sun*, do not claim to replace history. As Adichie herself has said: "[s]uccessful fiction does not need to be validated by 'real life'" (*In the Shadow* 11).

Lastly, Long's last point of critique focuses on Hirsch's familial gaze (see Long 150). He says: "[b]ut the emphasis on the family as the privileged context of postmemory restricts the ideological scope of Hirsch's work. Postmemory distinctly lacks explanatory force in situations where family matters are complicated by external socio-political factors and relations of power" (Long 151). However, Hirsch does pay attention to collective acts of remembrance in both the political and cultural sense, as has been touched upon in the analysis of Jan and Aleida Assmann's work. Nevertheless, having paid attention to all points of criticism, it becomes clear that postmemory is not always a perfect analytical tool, especially if contextual specificities are ignored in the analytical process. Nonetheless, by exercising great critical vigilance, it can still be applied to certain several cases. By looking at *Half of a*

Yellow Sun it will become clear that Adichie both adheres to Hirsch's idea of the postmemorial act of creating while challenging it at the same time.

2. Historical Background

“Look, the photographs [of war] say, this is what it’s like. This is what war does. And that, that is what it does, too. War tears, rends. War rips open, eviscerates. War scorches. War dismembers. War ruins.”

- Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*

2.1 The Origins and Traumatic Events of the Biafran War

If one wants to analyze how Adichie incorporated postmemory in her work, it is important to not only analyze the traumatic history that is at stake, but also what the trauma of the Nigeria-Biafra War actually entails. As *Half of a Yellow Sun* focuses on the traumatic events of the Nigeria-Biafra War, it is necessary to touch upon the events that led to the war and the traumatic occurrences of the war itself. The region that is currently known as Nigeria has been a British colony from 1914 until 1960, although it has been under British command since late nineteenth century. The Northern and Southern region of Nigeria were amalgamated by the British to secure their colonial rule on the area. By doing this the British united three different groups of people: the Hausa from the north, the Igbo from the southeast, and the Yoruba from the southwest. These three ethnically diverse groups had not much in common and the amalgamation did not prove successful in creating a united Nigerian nation. The colonizers executed a system of colonial rule that extorted the many cultural, social, religious and linguistic differences between the various groups (Atofarati 3). Major Abubakar Atofarati discusses the “full scale regionalism” that was pervasive in Nigeria in the final years of colonial rule: “[w]ith only residual power left to the central government, Nigeria politically took a turn for the worse, and there was a possibility of three countries emerging out of Nigeria” (6-7). Thus, Nigeria was far from being a homogenous country, which did not strengthen the struggle against the British colonizers. Contrarily, even anticolonial nationalism – which began to emerge in Nigeria after the Second World War – could not successfully unite the different ethnic groups in society. Tribal and ethnic interests took precedence over national interests and the anticolonial struggle made many victims at the Nigerian side (Atofarati 3). The country eventually freed itself from the yoke of colonial rule on October 1, 1960. However, Nigeria remained a member of the British Commonwealth for a year after its independence. In 1961 the northern region of British Cameroon merged with the Nigerian states and formed the new state the Federal Republic of Nigeria. The forced

imperial union of the different ethnic and religious groups in the area led to tensions that caused the Nigeria-Biafra War and still remain present in Nigerian society today.

Political unrest characterized Nigerian society the years after independence, which was only buttressed by the political and cultural differences between the three major ethnic groups. The political leaders of each group fought for their own interests in national politics and ignored the grievances this could cause for others. As Atofarati says: “the ugly embers of tribalism and sectionalism had been fanned into a deadly flame by all the political leaders. These leaders rode on the crest of this cancerous tribalism and ignorance of the people to power, at the expense of national unity and the nation” (7). The unequal political division in the country, corruption, and the malfunctioning constitution all intensified the failed political system in Nigeria. In addition, the social situation in Nigeria was tense as society was still trying to combine the near colonial past and the inherent Nigerian culture. After its independence, Nigeria could not simply move back to a pre-colonial social and political system, as colonial rule has had a pervasive impact on Nigerian society and its ideologies⁵. Moreover, the hostile relationships between the different national groups reached a highpoint and aggravated the already tense situation that Nigeria was in.

The eastern territory was overpopulated and had less fertile soil than the north. Consequently, many Igbo people moved to the north in the 1960s. This large migration stream from the east and the strong cultural differences and beliefs between the groups increased the tensions between the Igbo and the Hausa. The economical and social grievances came to a culmination point when an Igbo-dominated military group held a coup d'état on 15 January 1966. Igbo Major Patrick Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu led the coup. Both Hausa as Yoruba leaders were killed during on this day, and the victim toll was estimated on twenty-five people. The Uppsala website states that “later the same day Major Nzeogwu, speaking on behalf of the Supreme Council of the Revolution of the Nigerian Armed Forces in a radio broadcast, proclaimed the suspension of the constitution. He also stated that the Revolutionary Council employed military force to achieve the aim of ‘establish[ing] a strong united and prosperous nation, free from corruption and internal strife’” (UPCD). Following Nzeogwu’s speech, the Igbo General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi became the President of the Nigerian republic. However, in July 1966 Igbo majors feared total Igbo rule and staged a counter coup, in which General Aguiyi-Ironsi was killed. With international support of the British and Americans, General Yakubu Gowon became president. Despite the international

⁵ Cf. Atofarati’s “The Nigerian Civil War: Causes, Strategies, And Lessons Learnt” in which he explains the influence that British colonialism has had on Nigerian society.

support that the Hausa general enjoyed, the Igbo Lieutenant Colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu refused to recognize General Gowon as the rightful president.

The strained political situation had a negative effect on the population and suspicion between the different groups only became worse. The tensions eventually erupted into anti-Igbo violence, as northern people feared that the Igbo wanted to exercise full power in the country. The violent attacks prompted many Igbos to move out of the northern regions. Civil war was inevitable at this point and on 30 May 1967 Colonel Ojukwu declared the secession of the southeast region of Nigeria as the Republic of Biafra. The title of Adichie's novel was inspired on the flag of Biafra, as it shows half of a rising sun. This is particularly interesting as Adichie focuses her novel on the Igbo-point of view. There will be elaborated on this in the following chapter. The Nigerian government and the international community, however, did not recognize Biafra as a country, which led to an extremely violent and devastating civil war.

Obinna et al. discuss the traumatic character of the Biafran War in their research on PTSD on war survivors. They state that during the war “millions and millions of Biafran Igbo people were rounded up in several regions, states, cities, towns, and villages in northern and western Nigeria and *slaughtered*” (Obinna et al. 1480, emphasis added). At first, President Gowon promised to keep the Igbo people safe under his rule. However, the opposite proved to be true as cases of anti-Igbo violence reached extremely high numbers. Moreover, sexual violence was regularly used as a powerful weapon during the war: “[d]uring the 1966 Biafran war, their young [Igbo] girls were first gang raped by scores of men and then carried to Leper colonies to be raped by leper patients before being killed; the Biafran nursing mothers had their breast cut off; while their men when caught are buried alive” (Obinna et al. 1480). These heinous acts were not an exception to the rule as pogroms and rioting marked the anti-Igbo sentiment that existed in Nigeria. As has been stated before, the international community played a huge role in the war as they supported the Nigerian government and boycotted Biafra from the rest of the world. Partly due to this lack of international disapproval against anti-Igbo violence, President Gowon declared a war of genocide against Biafra, “a war that made the Somalian Genocide look like a mere ethnic clash” (Obinna et al. 1480). were displaced. The death toll rose up to three million Biafrans at the end of the war.

The violence against Igbo people was carried out by both the Nigerian army as well as by regular citizens. An eyewitness account published in *TIME Magazine* indicates the traumatizing character of these massacres. This particular massacre was carried out on October 14, 1966 in the airport of Lagos. Nigerian soldiers massacred all the Igbo people in the airport and then carried on to Lagos city to continue the killings (Stafford 21). The

soldiers were joined by Hausa civilians who took up homemade weapons and other arms in their rampage against Igbo people: “[a]ll night long and into the morning the massacre went on. Then tired but fulfilled, the Hausas drifted back to their homes and barracks to get some breakfast and sleep. Municipal garbage trucks were sent out to collect the dead and dump them into mass graves outside the city” (quoted in Stafford 21). For fear of their lives many Igbos moved to the east and resided in what they would see as the beginning of a new life, materialized in the Republic of Biafra.

However, Biafra would only manage to hold power over their country for three years, as the Biafran military was severely outnumbered by the Nigerian army. Nigeria was not planning on giving up the resources and land in the region of Biafra and the traumatic civil war continued to move on. Despite its determination, Biafra endured many losses and starvation and violence characterized everyday life for many Biafrans. Many people lost their family members or were mutilated during the war. The Biafran war did not only leave physical scars, but the atrocities of the war mentally traumatized many people as well. In the words of Obinna et al.: “[e]ver since then [i.e. the civil war], the Igbo people are often exposed to traumatic events that flood their life with pain and sorrow. The recurrent traumatic events like religious conflicts, political conflict and ethnic conflict in the Northern and Western Nigeria, in which the Igbo earn victim-hood, only reinforce their lived experiences of the Biafran [annihilation], a pogrom that can only be compared to that of the second world war Nazi [sic]” (1481).

Hope marked Biafran life when it was first created in 1967, but desperation took over soon as everyday life was characterized by fear, hunger and violence. After having endured many losses with his army, General Ojukwu realized that he could not win the war. Ojukwu fled the country on 13 January 1970 and Biafra capitulated to Nigeria. The conflict has been dormant for many years since then. However, the tensions between the different ethnic groups never went away and the grievances of the different ethnic groups came to another culmination point in 2009. Since then, the Islamist group Boko Haram keeps clashing with the Nigerian government. The traumatic character of the Biafran war has had a continuous influence on many people, even on the younger generations who did not experience the war themselves. This does not only become noticeable when looking at the current, tensed political and social situation in Nigeria, but it is also apparent in Adichie’s postmemorial act of creation, *Half of a Yellow Sun*.

2.2 Adichie's Personal Background

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie was born on 15 September 1977 in Enugu, Nigeria. Her family is from Abba in the Anambra State, but she grew up in Nsukka where she briefly studied pharmacy and medicine. Adichie moved to the United States when she was nineteen, to study communication and political science. Adichie wrote several novels and short stories. She has been an acclaimed writer since she published her first novel *Purple Hibiscus* in 2003. Her second novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* was published in 2006. Adichie's work focuses on (post)colonialism (and the ongoing effects thereof), imperial violence, immigration and Nigerian history. She gets much of her inspiration from her own life and her family and their past has influenced her work as well. Her father was a professor of statistics and her mother was a university registrar. Adichie's parents have both experienced the Nigeria-Biafra war at first hand, and they have both lost their fathers in the war. Adichie's postmemorial experience with the Biafran War is mainly derived from her parents' stories. In addition, she did research on the war in novels and pictures and she asked people where they were during the war and what happened to them. However, her strongest link to the war is due to the experiences of her close relatives. This will be further explored in relation to Hirsch's use of the familial gaze in the next chapter.

2.3 The Novel

Half of a Yellow Sun vividly narrates the traumatizing events of the Biafran War and relives the feelings of deprivation that were inherent to the war. The novel tells the story of Olanna, Ugwu and Richard in the years before and during the Nigeria-Biafra War. Ugwu is the houseboy of professor Odenigbo. Ugwu comes from a small village and is uneducated when he comes to live with his new boss, professor Odenigbo, in the university town of Nsukka. Ugwu receives education from Odenigbo and becomes a well-rounded character throughout the novel. Professor Odenigbo teaches Mathematics and is a fervent supporter of anti-colonial principles and pride and moral ideologies mark his character. Olanna and Kainene are twin sisters from Lagos. Olanna falls in love with Odenigbo and leaves her Hausa boyfriend, Mohammed, to move in with Odenigbo. Richard is a British man who moved to Nigeria to research tribal Nigerian art. His main focus lies on Igbo-Ukwu art and he attempts to write a book about it. Richard becomes infatuated with Olanna's sister, Kainene. The lives of Olanna, Ugwu and Richard intersect throughout the novel and their personal experiences during the Biafra war are narrated.

The novel is divided in thirty-six chapters and each chapter is alternately narrated by Ugwu, Olanna and Richard. This adds more depth to the novel as different points of views are represented. It is important to note, however, that the novel is written from an Igbo-point of view. Ugwu, Olanna, Kainene and Odenigbo are all Igbo. Richard is in love with Kainene and strongly sympathizes with the Igbo-struggles. Thus, the Nigeria-Biafra War is depicted in a way adhering to Adichie's background, as she is Igbo herself. The focus lies on the representation of Adichie's own postmemory of the Biafran War, as she inherited it from her (Igbo) parents. Adichie also chose to engage with the confusion and disconnection that war can generate by using interchanging timeframes. The novel is divided in two periods: the early sixties and the late sixties. The novel starts out in the sixties, but the novel does not have a chronological course. Adichie parallels the bewilderment and mystification of trauma by moving forward to the late sixties in the beginning of the novel, leaving some things yet unrevealed for the reader. The late sixties are marked by the brutal conflict in Nigeria and the reader finds out that Odenigbo and Olanna are raising their daughter, Baby, in these insecure times. It is not until later in the novel – when Adichie moves her narration back to the early sixties – that the reader finds out that Baby is the result of Odenigbo cheating on Olanna with the housegirl of his mother. There are continuous shifts in the narration from times of peace to times of trauma and vice versa. This adds to the atmosphere of puzzlement and fear in times of war, which Adichie intelligently portrays in her novel.

The story starts out in a peaceful way, as Nigerian life seems relatively untroubled. Olanna is in love with Odenigbo and they invite their friends over every night to philosophize over politics and the current social situation in Nigeria. Ugwu adapts to his new life in Odenigbo's house and reads many books next and is a fervent student at school. Richard befriends Olanna and Odenigbo through Kainene and spends many nights at Odenigbo's house as well. As the novel evolves, the war comes closer and the late-night discussions at Odenigbo's house take on a more tense character. The war is not far removed from their own personal lives anymore and the relationships in the novel are reshaped by the life-threatening events that occur around the main characters. The idyllic setting at the beginning of the novel is contrasted with the many traumatic events of the war that Adichie vividly brings to life. All characters witness or go through certain traumatizing events during the novel. Olanna, Odenigbo and Ugwu have to flee Nsukka when it becomes unsafe to stay behind. Olanna witnesses the massacre of Igbo people in the town where her family lives. Her uncle, aunt and cousin are slaughtered and Olanna never gets over the loss. On the train back home, Olanna sits next to a woman who holds her dead daughter's head in a calabash. These brutal events

leave Olanna so traumatized that they have paralyzing effects on her body. In addition, Ugwu is taken away to fight in the Biafran army. At one point during his time in the army, Ugwu rapes an innocent girl, which has a devastating effect on his character as well. Hunger, fear, violence and death mark the lives of the main characters. The graphic descriptions of trauma are distressing and may represent the memories of many Biafrans during the war. However, it is crucial to remember that despite its interaction with history, the novel is still a piece of fiction. Adichie takes many liberties with history in her novel, yet *Half of a Yellow Sun* brings to mind the traumatizing atmosphere of the Biafran War.

3. Trauma and Postmemory in *Half of a Yellow Sun*

"I wrote this novel because I wanted to write about love and war, because I grew up in the shadow of Biafra, because I lost both grandfathers in the Nigeria-Biafra war, because I wanted to engage with my history to make sense of my present, because many issues that led to the war remain unresolved in Nigeria today, because my father has tears in his eyes when he speaks of losing his father, because my mother still cannot speak at length about losing her father in a refugee camp, because the brutal bequests of colonialism make me angry, because the thought of the egos and indifference of men leading to the unnecessary death of men and women and children enrages me, because I don't ever want to forget."

– Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "The Stories of Africa"

3.1 Adichie as a Member of the Postgeneration

In the quote above, Adichie explains that she has had memories of the Biafran war since she was young. This exemplifies Hirsch's theory on how traumatic memories can be fully incorporated in the minds of the postgeneration. The intersection of cultural, personal and collective trauma is palpable in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, as it describes the traumatic events of the Biafran War and its effects on individuals. Hirsch's theory on postmemory can be applied to both Adichie as an author from the postgeneration and her postmemorial work *Half of a Yellow Sun*. To give an inclusive image of the level of postmemory in Adichie's novel it is necessary to elaborate on the ways in which Adichie can be seen as a member of the postgeneration.

Adichie grew up with stories from the war and the memories of her parents are incorporated in her novel. As she said: "[m]y parents' stories formed the backbone of my research" (Adichie, "The Stories" 3). Thus, Adichie based her novel on the experiences and memories of her family members. She was not alive during the traumatic events of the war but she still feels a strong connection with the traumatic memories of her family members. Her parents were not the only ones who transmitted their stories onto her, other family members did as well. In the foreword of the novel Adichie dedicates her novel to both her grandparents. Both her grandfathers died during the war, but her grandmothers survived the events. Adichie says: "[t]his book is dedicated to *their* memories: *ka fa nodu na ndokwa*" (*Half* 1, emphasis added). Thus, Adichie clearly states that the memories in the novel are not

literally her memories. She acknowledges that her connection to the traumatic experiences of the Biafran war is imagined and that she has not physically lived through the war.

The death of her grandfathers and the experiences of her parents and other surviving family members have heavily influenced Adichie's life. In relation to this Adichie says:

I could not have written this book without my parents. My wise and wonderful father, Professor Nwoye James Adichie, *Odelu Ora Abba*, ended his many stories with the words *agha ajoka*, which in my literal translation is "war is very ugly". He and my defending and devoted mother, Mrs Ifeoma Grace Adichie, have always wanted me to know, I think, that what matters is not what they went through but that they survived. I am grateful to them for their stories and for so much more. (*Half* 435)

In this quote it becomes clear that Adichie recognizes her position as a member of the postgeneration. Moreover, Hirsch's discussion of the familial gaze comes to the fore once again. As has been discussed before, following Aleida Assmann's theory, for Hirsch the family is a privileged site of memorial transmission. The intergenerational character of postmemory comes to the fore in this discussion, as Adichie draws from the stories of her family members. In addition to the memories of her parents and grandparents, Adichie mentions other family members as well. She specifically mentions two of her uncles who fought in the Biafran army during the war (*Half* 435). Adichie thanks them for sharing their stories with her. Further, Adichie's cousin inspired her as well for his narration of his memories to the Biafran war, in which he was a young boy (*Half* 435). Again it becomes clear that Adichie gets her memories from family members who experienced the Biafran war at first hand.

Although family is indeed a crucial factor in Adichie's personal postmemorial process, it is not the only postmemorial medium that inspired her work. Adichie encloses a long list of novels and books at the end of her novel, which she used during her writing research. Moreover, she mentions that she talked to many other people about the war, outside of the familial space. Adichie says: "I read books. I looked at photos. I talked to people. In the four years that it took to finish the book, I would often ask older people I met, 'Where were you in 1967?' and then take it from there" ("The Stories" 3). Thus, it becomes clear that Adichie uses other sources to shape her postmemorial being and incorporates it as such in her novel.

3.2 The Postmemorial Act of Creation

By internalizing and reshaping memories of others, Adichie becomes a spokesperson for the collective memory of the Biafrans. It has to be emphasized though, that she cannot speak for an entire generation. However – when focusing on the process and not on the psychological consequences of postmemorial acts of creation – her work can be seen as a form of affiliative postmemory, for it reactivates and re-embodies “more distant political and cultural memorial structures by reinvesting them with resonant individual and familial forms of mediation and aesthetic expression” (Hirsch, *Writing and Visual* 33). Adichie interpellates the memories of her parents and acts as a spokesperson for other members of the postgeneration. Her novel is an example of horizontal transmission of cultural memory by a member of the postgeneration to others of the same generation, or later generations. The stories that are passed down to Adichie through her family are a form of familial postmemory. *Half of a Yellow Sun* supports Hirsch’s viewpoint that members of the postgeneration can have such a strong link with memories of others – especially the memories of their family members – that they incorporate them into their own being. Hirsch says: “[by creating postmemorial works] less directly affected participants can become engaged in the generation of postmemory that can persist even after all participants and even their familial descendants are gone” (*Writing and Visual* 33). This is what *Half of a Yellow Sun* largely does as it focuses on Adichie’s (and her generation’s) postmemorial experience and the memories of the Biafrans during the war.

Adichie creates a detailed narrative of the trauma in the Biafran war, while simultaneously rejecting the false representation of Nigeria in Western discourses. She is very clear about who should write the stories of Africa, and Nigeria in particular. This is especially exemplified in her novel when she reveals that Ugwu is actually the writer of the book *The World was Silent when we Died*, and not the British Richard. Furthermore, Adichie feels that the war is not talked about correctly and she insinuates that postmemorial acts of creation are needed “because it gives a voice to many issues that have been officially swept aside by the country but which continue to resonate for many Igbo people” (“The Stories” 4). The binary relationship between collective memory and personal memory comes to the forefront in this, as, according to Adichie, the stories and memories of the Igbo people have been largely ignored in Nigeria.

The war is still talked about, still a potent political issue. But I find that it is mostly talked about in uninformed and unimaginative ways. People repeat the same things they have been told without having a full grasp of the complex nature of the war, or they hold militant positions lacking in nuance. It also remains, to my surprise, very

ethnically divisive: the (brave enough) Igbo talk about it and the non-Igbo think the Igbo should get over it. (“The Stories” 3)

Her novel, then, is a form of affiliative postmemory, for it evinces traits of intragenerational medial transmission of postmemory. Hirsch buttresses the importance of the past and the living connection with this past. In this light, Adichie can, as a member of the postgeneration herself, transmit her postmemories and experiences to other people of her generation. Her novel sheds light on the traumatic events of the Biafran war and gives Nigerian collective memory a voice in a personal setting. It is important to note, however, that Adichie mainly writes from an Igbo-point of view. The memories of the Hausa and Fulani people are barely included in the novel. One of Olanna’s older boyfriends, Mohammed, is a Hausa man. Mohammed gets some attention in the novel, but the story is narrated from an Igbo viewpoint in the character of Olanna and Ugwu, or a British, Igbo-positive viewpoint in the character of Richard. This provokes some critical questions as it could diminish the ethical character of *Half of a Yellow Sun* as a postmemorial project. Nevertheless, Adichie never claims that her novel should be regarded as a factual piece of history. Rather, Adichie focuses on the “emotional truth” of her work, which – although it is not similar – can be compared to Hirsch’s “living connection”. As Hirsch says: “Postmemorial work, [...] strives to *reactivate* and *re-embody* more distant political and cultural memorial structures by reinvesting them with resonant individual and familial forms of mediation and aesthetic expression” (*Writing and Visual* 33). This is exactly what Adichie’s novel largely does.

While discussing the concept of emotional truth, Adichie talks about her personal postmemorial experience while writing the novel and the impact this has had on her life. Not only did the stories of her family members have a strong influence on her life, the postmemorial writing process heavily shaped Adichie’s identity. She says:

The writing itself was a bruising experience. I struggled to maintain many fragile balances. I cried often, was frequently crippled with doubt and anxiety, often wondered whether to stop or to scale back. But there were also moments of extravagant joy when I recognized, in a character or moment or scene, that quality of emotional truth. (Adichie, *In the Shadow* 11-12)

With this Adichie acknowledges the healing powers of a postmemorial act of creation and supports Hirsch’s vision of the living connection between the memories of the first generation and those of the postgeneration. Emotional truth is “a quality different from honesty and more resilient than fact, a quality that existed not in the kind of fiction that explains but in the kind of fiction that shows” (Adichie, *In the Shadow* 9). With this, Adichie admits that her novel is

not a factual piece, but she does focus on her link with the past and the impact this has on her life and her work.

3.3 Trauma and Postmemory in the Novel

Extrapolating on the concept of emotional truth it is useful to focus on Adichie's narration strategies. Adichie tries to revoke the emotions of war trauma by linking memories to fiction. Although the novel is focused on the Biafran War, Adichie does not try to narrate the factual happenings of war. Rather, Adichie tries to capture the emotions and everyday realities of people in war. Related to this, the postmemorial creative act is central to the novel and Adichie emphasizes this as well: "[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 constantly aware of a responsibility to something larger than art" (*In the Shadow* 11). With this, Adichie recognizes her novel as a postmemorial creation. She admits altering little facts for the sake of creativity, like places or names. Moreover, she focuses more on the personal experiences of people at the time of great political unrest. Rather than focusing on the actual political events, Adichie describes the impact these events had on the characters of the novel. For example, when Olanna sits in the plane on her way back home after a trip to her family in Kano, she meets a Fulani man. He clearly expresses his distrust in Igbo people, not knowing that Olanna is Igbo herself: "[t]he problem with Igbo people is that they want to control everything in this country. Everything. Why can't they stay in their East? They own all the shops; they control the civil service, even the police. If you are arrested for any crime, as long as you can say *keda* they will let you go" (Adichie, *Half* 227). It becomes clear that tensions between the different ethnic groups are rising and the reader is aware of the political events in the background, but they are not given prior attention. The focus lies on personal experiences and the effects of these events on the characters. Adichie represents the realities of trauma in a very detailed manner, which implies the strong connection Adichie has to the memories of her family members.

The reader gets a detailed description of trauma, which brings to mind the author's close connection to the events of the Biafran War. Adichie's inherited memories are branded in the fabric of the novel, as many traumatizing events are narrated in detail. Adichie uses these narration strategies to evoke the emotions of fear and despair that were quintessential to the Biafran War. Consequently, at some point in the novel, the political and social tensions reach a culmination point and violence breaks out. The Biafran army loses the university town of Nsukka to Nigeria and Olanna's family and Ugwu have to flee. Panic takes over and

insecurity marks the atmosphere of the novel and the lives of the characters. As the group leaves Nsukka they see “women with boxes on their head and babies tied to their backs, barefoot children carrying bundles of clothes or yams or boxes, men dragging bicycles” (Adichie, *Half* 179). The image of refugees being displaced and walking on roads is one that pops up in many people’s minds when thinking of war. As historical research has shown, “[m]ost of these Biafran war survivors had lost their husband, wife, children, properties and relatives following the flood of these recurrent internal crises and conflict” (Obinna et al. 1481). Adichie, then, actively interlinks fiction with history in her novel, as historical facts are incorporated into the novel. However, Adichie focuses on the effects these historical events have on the characters personally and their relationships. This becomes especially clear when looking at the traumatizing effects war has had on Olanna.

As anti-Igbo violence has reached a highpoint, Olanna is in the North to check on her family and see if they are safe. Unfortunately, she is too late and a detailed narration of her experiences are presented:

She [Olanna] stopped when she saw the bodies. Uncle Mbaezi lay facedown in an ungainly twist, legs splayed. Something creamy-white oozed through the large gash on the back of his head. Aunty Ifeka lay on the veranda. The cuts on her naked body were smaller, dotting her arms and legs like slightly parted red lips. (Adichie, *Half* 147)

The detailed description of Olanna’s experience makes the reader powerfully aware of the horrors of war. The death of her beloved family members, traumatizes Olanna in such a way that she is in a constant state of numbness. On top of this another traumatizing event occurs, which continues to torment Olanna throughout the novel as well. On her way back from the North, Olanna sits next to another refugee woman in a crowded train. The woman is holding a calabash firmly in her hands:

The woman with the calabash nudged her [...]. “*Bianu*, come,” she said. “Come and take a look.” She opened the calabash. “Take a look,” she said again. Olanna looked into the bowl. She saw the little girl’s head with the ashy-grey skin and the plaited hair and rolled-back eyes and open mouth. She stared at it for a while before she looked away. Somebody screamed. (Adichie, *Half* 149)

Memory is extremely important in this section, as Olanna vividly remembers every detail of her train ride. The memories of seeing her dead family members and the woman with the calabash haunt Olanna throughout the story. The events have such a traumatizing effect on her that she is not able to walk anymore: “Olanna’s Dark Swoops began the day she came back from Kano, the day her legs failed. Her legs were fine when she climbed down from the

train [...]. But at the front door of Odenigbo's house, they failed. So did her bladder. There was the melting of her legs, and there was also the wetness of hot liquid running between her thighs" (Adichie, *Half* 156). Olanna's Dark Swoops are a direct consequence of trauma and her memories continue to pop up in her head as the story evolves.

In relation to this, the memories that haunt Olanna parallel the memories of Adichie's family members. Although we do not exactly know what happened to Adichie's parents, we do know the haunting effects of their memories: "because my father has tears in his eyes when he speaks of losing his father, because my mother still cannot speak at length about losing her father in a refugee camp" (Adichie, "The Stories" 2). These memories were so strong that Adichie feels a deep connection to them, to such an extent that she decided to write a novel about it: "I have always known that I would write a novel about Biafra. [...] I felt that I had to approach the subject with little steps, paint on a smaller canvas first, before starting the novel" (Adichie, "The Stories" 2). Adichie had to write her postmemories down to deal with the trauma of her parents, to never forget what happened to her family members. In a similar fashion, Olanna learns to deal with trauma by telling her story to Ugwu. Ugwu writes it down in the book *The World Was Silent When We Died*. When telling Richard about the book, Ugwu proudly says: "it will take me many more years to finish it and I will call it 'Narrative of the Life of a Country' (Adichie, *Half* 424). By writing down the stories of Olanna and other Biafrans, Ugwu wants to show the world that the Biafrans will never forget, and that the memories of the war will live on, even after all the survivors have passed on. Ugwu, then, acts in accordance to affiliative postmemory, as he wishes to transfer memories of the war to others of his and later generations. However, Adichie cannot be compared to Ugwu as she is a member of the postgeneration and not actually an eyewitness, whereas Ugwu is a part of the first generation. Nevertheless, both *The World Was Silent When We Died* and *Half of a Yellow Sun* incorporate and reshape traumatic memories to inform people of the happenings of war. The books also help their authors to deal with a traumatic past. Furthermore, Adichie intelligently intersects history with fiction, as she includes the sections from Ugwu's book at the end of his chapters. Ugwu's book does not only narrate the traumatizing emotional effects of the war, it also gives the reader historical facts about the Biafran War. With this the intersection of history, memory and fiction becomes extremely palpable throughout the novel.

Bringing back to mind Hirsch's theory, the distinction between postmemory and a traditional memory comes to the fore again. Adichie narrates the historical events of Nigeria, but more importantly, the personal memories of her family form the foundation of the novel.

Although the novel is not a narration of her own experiences, it still inscribes many of the memories of her family and the connection that Adichie feels to them. This becomes palpable in the character of Ugwu in *Half of Yellow Sun*. Ugwu's character is based on the houseboy of Adichie's parents during the war. His name is Mellitus and Adichie dedicated the book to him as well. Adichie says:

When my mum spoke about Mellitus, what a blessing he was, how much he helped her, how she did not know what she would have done without him, I remember being moved but also thinking that he could not possibly have been the saint my mother painted, that he must have been flawed and human. ("The Stories" 5)

As Ugwu is based on Mellitus it becomes evident that the memories of Adichie's mother are clearly incorporated in her postmemorial novel. Adichie makes her mother's memories her own by creating the character of Ugwu and imagining her own story of his life. Ugwu is a well-rounded character and he grows spiritually throughout the novel. At first he is portrayed as an innocent and rather unknowing young man from a small village, but as soon as he comes to live with Odenigbo he delves into literature and educates himself. A shocking moment in the story is when Ugwu rapes an innocent girl during his forced time in the army. By incorporating this in the novel, Adichie takes her creative freedom and uses it to alter her mother's memories of Mellitus. Adichie made Ugwu less perfect and more flawed, she made him more into a human being, rather than the perfect image that her mother had of Mellitus. Adichie uses her creative freedom to share the stories and memories that she finds important for the world to know.

3.4 Adichie in the Hirsch versus Long Debate

Although the postmemorial creative act is central to the novel, Adichie did not alter the main events of the time. She says:

I could not let a character be changed by anything that had not actually happened. If fiction is indeed the soul of history, then I was equally committed to the fiction and the history, equally keen to be true to the spirit of the time as well as to my artistic vision of it. (*In the Shadow* 11)

This remark prompts some criticism, as it is extremely difficult to regard fiction as a factual piece of history. Memories can be forgotten or changed through time. They are not reliable sources of history. Long buttresses this as he discusses the problematic relationship between history and fiction. He is right when he states that experiences are not universal and that they should not be regarded as such. Hirsch concedes that descendants of perpetrators and victims

of trauma have different experiences of postmemory. Yet, she claims that “they share the familial ties that facilitate intergenerational identification” (quoted in Long 163). This is exactly what Long contests as he strongly rejects the idea that in postmemorial projects, an “identification with the perpetrator might represent an ethical relation to the oppressed or persecuted other” (Long 163). Similarly, Adichie does not relate to the perpetrators of the Biafran trauma in her novel. Despite the fact that Adichie and her novel indicate many of the postmemorial characteristics, they simultaneously challenge Hirsch’s theory. *Half of a Yellow Sun* is indeed not a factual narration and cannot be seen as representative for an entire generation. This is especially the case because the novel is written from an Igbo-point of view and does not take into account the Hausa or Fulani perspective during the Biafran war. In this light, Adichie challenges Hirsch’s postmemorial framework insofar that Adichie’s Igbo familial ties are not similar to those of the Hausa or Fulani. It would be difficult and rather utopian to compare different postmemorial experiences in such a complicated conflict and the memories it leaves behind.

As Long rightfully states, it would be morally wrong to apply postmemory theory in a universal one-size-fits-all-approach. As most of the postmemory theory has originated from Holocaust experiences, it is crucial to take up a careful approach when applying these theories to a Nigerian case. Adichie, then, challenges postmemory theory as a Western concept and her novel possesses certain elements that clearly resist the universality of postmemory as an analytical tool. Adichie emphasizes the uniqueness of the Nigerian case and she repudiates the adaptation of Western tools to African cases. Related to this, narration plays an important role in the novel. Nigeria is known for its oral history and stories were often passed down to younger generations orally, instead of through written narrations. It is true that postmemory is concept coined by a Western woman, but narration plays an important role in Western postmemorial acts of creation as well. Stories, memories and behaviors are passed down to younger generations, which is similar to the stories that Adichie heard from her parents. In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, the reader is led to believe that Richard is actually writing *The World Was Silent When We Died* instead of Ugwu. However, because Richard is not Biafran but a Westerner, it is not his story to tell: “Richard paused. ‘The war isn’t my story to tell, really.’ Ugwu nodded. He had never thought that it was” (Adichie, *Half* 245). Adichie says about this: “I wanted to make a strongly-felt political point about who should be writing the stories of Africa” (“The Stories” 6). The authorship of Ugwu’s book is extremely interesting, because Adichie’s authorship could be questioned as well, seeing that she has not experienced any of the events that she narrates in her novel. In Long’s viewpoint, Adichie’s postmemorial

act of creation could wrongly represent the memories of the first generation. By internalizing the memories of her forebears, Adichie may act in an unethical manner, as she would replace both her memories and those of the first generation with her fiction. However, Adichie reverses Long's criticism by acknowledging the fact that the memories that are so real for her are not really her own memories, but those of others. Moreover, Adichie's novel is about remembering the happenings of the war, and the effect this had had on people. Long fears the disjunction between memory and factual history and emphasizes the complexities of carelessly combining these two in postmemorial acts of creation. However, the intersection of memory, history and fiction in a novel may be a powerful tool to actively engage with traumatic memories. Thus, there is indeed an ethical relation between traumatic experiences and postmemory, because they feel so real for members of the postgeneration while they simultaneously acknowledge the postness of their memories. For that reason, *Half of a Yellow Sun* still largely acts in accordance with Hirsch's theory. The novel is a quintessential form of remembrance and strives to make sense of a troubled Nigerian past.

Conclusion

“Those who cannot remember their past are condemned to relive it.”

- George Santayana, quoted by Jan Assmann in “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity”

Acting in accordance to Santayana’s saying, Hirsch emphasizes the importance of the past and the continuing influence it can have on the present. Especially in times of trauma, memories can be carried on to later generations in a particular fashion. This particular fashion is exemplified in the process of postmemory, which entails the deep connection that the postgeneration has with the traumatic memories of their predecessors. Although there is a difference between the experiences of the first generation and the postmemories of the postgeneration, Hirsch still argues for the deep connection that later generations have to previous traumas. Thus, postmemory is not mediated by actual powers of recall. Rather, postmemorial acts of creation, such as novels, can support this process of imaginative investment in traumas not personally experienced by a postmemorial subject. As is exemplified in Adichie’s case, family plays an important role in postmemory, because it is the main site where memories are transferred to others. Simultaneously, affiliative postmemory – the horizontal transmission of postmemories – exists side by side of familial postmemory. Oral transmissions are easily transmitted between people and can inscribe traumatic memories in the postgeneration. However, affiliative postmemory is most powerful when it is documented, because it makes it easier to transmit these experiences to others, especially if these people are located outside of the familial sphere. The transmission of these postmemories is often mediated through several works of creation. The focus here was put on literature, and novels in particular. This postmemorial act of creation is emphasized in Hirsch’s work and exemplified by Adichie’s novel.

J.J. Long criticizes this esteemed therapeutic function of postmemory and claims that postmemorial acts of creation can be unethical. He bases his standpoint on the notion that people’s memories are not to be regarded as factual representations of history. In addition, Long states that postmemory can be an unethical theory because it encourages people to displace their own memories with memories of their parents or other surviving family members. Not only would this diminish the traumatic experiences of the first generation, it would also take away from the own lived experiences of the later generations. Hirsch’s claim that postmemory entails an ethical relation to the past is a too dubious claim in Long’s view:

“[s]uch a claim runs the risk of fetishizing identification with the victim without regard to wider political configuration” (Long 161). Thus, Long fears that postmemory may be used erroneously, which will lead to a moral downfall of the concept and the therapeutic effects it may establish. Moreover, staying within the realm of ethics, Long argues that postmemory cannot be universally applied. Applying the notion of postmemory to several cases without critical awareness of the specificities of each case will diminish the ethical character of postmemory. However, this does not mean that postmemory cannot possibly be applied universally. Rather, it means that one should undertake great vigilance in detecting the nuances of each case, which is exactly what Adichie does in her novel. Thus, Long largely makes moralistic claims against postmemorial acts of creation that undermine the ethical relation between postmemory and a traumatic past. This does not mean that postmemory is inherently unethical, but that postmemorial creators can lose sight of what is history and what is postmemory. The intersection between memory, fiction and history can be confusing, but it is not impossible to detect postmemory in traumatic experiences outside of the scope of the Holocaust. This is illustrated by Adichie’s case, as she recognizes the traumatic past of her parents while simultaneously expressing her connection to this past in her novel.

The final words of Adichie’s novel read out as follows: “[m]ay we always remember” (436). It has been shown that the Biafran War has had a perpetuating effect on its survivors and its descendants. As Hirsch says: “postwar childhood is not protected from the history it has inherited” (*Writing and Visual* 30). In Adichie’s case, the memories of her parents are so ingrained in her being that she felt the need to write them down. A collective traumatic event, such as the Biafran War, can strongly influence a personal sense of self. This intersection of collective history and personal memory is clearly detectable in Chimamanda Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun*. With the Biafran War at the core of her novel, Adichie tries to make sense of the present by engaging with a traumatic Nigerian past. The atrocities of the war have had a continuous effect on Nigerian society. It becomes clear that Adichie touches upon the continuation of past trauma in the present and the effects it has on people who have not witnessed the trauma themselves.

The personal experiences of Adichie’s parents and historical Nigerian events form the backbone of Adichie’s novel. The memories of Adichie’s parents and other family members have inspired her to write the novel as she has always felt a strong connection to the past of her predecessors. This is what Hirsch calls the living connection with a past that is not someone’s lived experience. In Adichie’s case, her living connection with the past was so strong that she gives a detailed narration of the events in Biafra during the war. The novel is

not only a way of dealing with the past for Adichie herself, it also can have postmemorial healing effects for others of the Nigerian postgeneration, or even for the older generations. This is a form of affiliative postmemory and helps people to connect with their past and relate to others who have the same (post)memories as the postmemorial creator, which is Adichie in this case. In this light, postmemory, and especially postmemorial acts of creation can have a therapeutic function. Adichie has explained her connection to the Biafran War and the memories of her family members many times. Familial postmemory is extremely palpable in Adichie's person, as she connects so deeply with the memories of her parents. This connection was so strong that Adichie felt the need to write about it and pass her postmemorial experiences on to others. This postmemorial act of creation evokes the sense of emotional truth that Adichie focuses on in her work. Fact and fiction melt together in *Half of Yellow Sun* as historical trauma is paralleled to personal emotions.

Although Long makes some fair points of criticism towards the pitfalls in Hirsch's theory, I still argue that Adichie's novel is largely postmemorial piece, as she successfully refutes Long's critical remarks. The memories of Adichie's parents do not replace her own memories as Long likes to believe. Rather, Adichie wrote the novel because she felt that the stories of the war were not accurately portrayed thus far. She writes about the feelings that the stories of her parents ignited in her, what it did to her personally. The novel, then, is an extension of her personal feelings as a member of the postgeneration, which she documents in a postmemorial manner. However, it would be wrong to claim that postmemory can be universally applied to any given context without critical consciousness. This would not only belittle the specificity of every case and experience, it would also be highly unethical, as Long argues. Nevertheless, Adichie is fully aware of the uniqueness of the Nigerian case, and the Igbo context specifically. All in all, the importance of trauma testimony is exemplified by Adichie's experiences as a member of the postgeneration and is fleshed out in her work. Adichie has shown that literature can be an excellent medium for challenging dominant discourses that underlie societal structures and attitudes. Postmemorial acts of creation, such as *Half of a Yellow Sun*, can help to make sense of a traumatic past while simultaneously offering a platform for those whose stories have not been listened to. Although Adichie cannot speak for an entire generation, her novel still evinces many of the characteristics of a postmemorial act of creation. Going against Long's complaints, Adichie never claims that her novel should be regarded as a factual piece of history. Rather, she focuses on the emotional truth of her work. History is never really over, and conserving memories in a postmemorial manner can help to make sense of a traumatic past; to avoid it ever happening again. After all,

as Wole Soyinka said: “[a] people who do not preserve their memory are a people who have forfeited their history” (quoted in Woods).

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