**Literary Enigma** *ISSN (Online): 3049-2033*
***The International Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture***
***(Peer-Reviewed and Indexed)***
***Vol. 3, Issue 2 (April 2026)***

**10**

# Reimagining Trauma: The Ethics of Memory in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*

D. ANITHA[1], Dr. B. R. VEERAMANI[2]

1) PhD Research Scholar, Department of Languages, Periyar Maniammai Institute of Science & Technology, Vallam, Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu, India – 613403. anithajai2227@gmail.com
2) Professor, Department of Languages, Periyar Maniammai Institute of Science & Technology, Vallam, Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu, India – 613403. brvmani@gmail.com
**Page No. 76-84**

***Abstract:*** *This paper examines the ethics of memory in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Half of a Yellow Sun. It argues that the novel redefines trauma as both a record of suffering and a process of ethical engagement. Existing research has addressed war, identity and psychological trauma in the novel. However, the ethical dimensions of memory remain underexplored. This study draws on trauma theory and postcolonial memory studies, particularly the works of Cathy Caruth, Dominick LaCapra and Michael Rothberg. It analyses how fragmented memory, silences and narrative multiplicity shape representations of the Biafran Civil War. Through close readings of key characters such as Ugwu and Olanna, the paper demonstrates that memory functions simultaneously as rupture and reconstruction. Adichie's narrative transforms traumatic experience into an ethical practice that restores agency to marginalised voices while fostering a sense of collective responsibility. Symbolic imagery and narrative structure further reinforce this movement from destruction to renewal. By conceptualising memory as both destructive and generative, this study contributes to contemporary debates in trauma and postcolonial literary studies. It further demonstrates that Half of a Yellow Sun reconfigures remembrance as a form of ethical consciousness that sustains dignity and resilience in the aftermath of violence. Furthermore, this study highlights the ethical significance of memory in postcolonial literature. It contributes to broader debates on trauma, representation and moral responsibility in contemporary literary studies.*
***Keywords:*** *Adichie; Half of a Yellow Sun; trauma theory; ethical memory; postcolonial literary studies; Biafran Civil War*

## Introduction

Memory in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* operates as both ruin and illumination. Like fire that reduces to ash yet generates light, remembrance preserves the residue of destruction while producing ethical insight. Set during the Biafran Civil War, the novel depicts one of the most devastating periods in Nigeria's history through representations of loss, displacement, hunger and survival. Rather than presenting the conflict solely as political history, Adichie foregrounds lived experience and affective memory, transforming national tragedy into a profound exploration of remembrance.

The novel has attracted sustained scholarly attention for its engagement with postcolonial identity, nationalism, gender and historical reconstruction. Critics have examined

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its representation of ethnic conflict, its reconfiguration of dominant historiography and its exploration of diasporic subjectivity. Although trauma and memory have been widely discussed, the ethical dimensions of remembrance remain underdeveloped. Existing research has largely approached memory as a means of recovering history or representing psychological experience. However, limited attention has been given to its role as a moral process that negotiates responsibility and dignity. The dual function of memory as both destructive and reconstructive therefore remains insufficiently theorised.

This study argues that *Half of a Yellow Sun* presents memory as both ash and light. It preserves fragments of violence and bears witness to suffering, while simultaneously enabling ethical reconstruction after war. Through the interconnected lives of Ugwu, Olanna and Richard, Adichie illustrates how traumatic memory shapes both individual consciousness and collective understanding. The characters do not merely recall the past. They struggle to inhabit, interpret and transform it into narrative. Memory thus emerges as an active form of moral agency through which silenced voices reclaim subjectivity and resist historical erasure.

Furthermore, the novel situates individual memory within broader structures of postcolonial history and nationhood. The Biafran Civil War is not represented as a closed historical event but as an enduring force that continues to shape identities, fears and aspirations. The psychological and emotional consequences of war extend into the present, positioning memory as a dynamic link between past and present. Through multiple perspectives and a fragmented narrative structure, Adichie demonstrates how remembrance functions simultaneously as wound and reconstruction**.**

By examining memory as ruin and illumination, this paper situates Adichie's novel within broader debates on trauma, postcolonial remembrance and narrative ethics. It argues that *Half of a Yellow Sun* does not merely represent suffering but reimagines remembrance as a transformative process that sustains grief while fostering resilience. In doing so, the novel suggests that even in the aftermath of devastation, ethical consciousness endures.

**Literature Review**

*Half of a Yellow Sun* has generated substantial critical attention in trauma studies, postcolonial theory and gender studies. Contemporary criticism has examined how Adichie negotiates memory in relation to war, nationalism and identity formation. These studies acknowledge the centrality of memory, yet they often approach it either as testimony to suffering or as a mechanism of resilience. The ethical transformation of memory from devastation to reconstruction remains conceptually underexplored.

Wosu reads the novel as a narrative of Biafran suffering that records both personal and collective memory of the Civil War. He argues that Adichie reconstructs Biafran history through emotional realism and lived experience. His analysis foregrounds the interplay between history and affect, demonstrating how narrative humanises political violence**.** However, his emphasis remains largely historical, treating memory primarily as a record of trauma rather than as a process of ethical reconfiguration.

Amarteifio compares *Half of a Yellow Sun* with Aminatta Forna's *The Memory of Love,* focusing on the emotional consequences of war. She highlights Adichie's use of multiple perspectives and disrupted chronology to expose the enduring impact of violence. Her reading underscores storytelling as an empathetic gesture that enables confrontation with the past. Although this analysis recognises memory as transformative, it privileges psychological endurance over the ethical implications of remembrance.

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Critical interpretations that focus on gender further extend the discussion of memory and resilience in the novel. Feghabo examines representations of womanhood and resilience, identifying compassion and education as modes of communal reconstruction. Her work connects gender to moral survival and emphasises empathy as strength. Similarly, Khutia draws on the concept of motherism to frame motherhood as a social philosophy rooted in love and renewal. She contends that maternal care sustains remembrance and fosters continuity in the face of trauma. Nwokocha reconsiders female sexuality in the novel and explores the relationship between body, trauma and autonomy, demonstrating how memory facilitates recovery of selfhood after violence.

Collectively, these studies establish memory and survival as central to Adichie's narrative vision**.** Yet most interpretations position memory either as evidence of pain or as proof of endurance. The dialectical movement between destruction and illumination has not received sustained critical attention**.** In particular, the ethical reconstitution of memory as both the legacy of violence and a source of renewal remains insufficiently examined in existing criticism.

Recent critical studies on trauma and memory have expanded beyond traditional boundaries of postcolonial studies. Duce (2025) re-evaluates established definitions of trauma in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, arguing that Adichie complicates conventional models through a fluid negotiation between victimhood and agency. Similarly, Adebayo (2024) examines memory in African postcolonial fiction. He demonstrates how narrative engages with historical rupture and collective remembrance while revealing the persistence of the past within contemporary consciousness.

In a related vein, the work of Ojuola (2024) explores the intersections of memory, trauma and identity in Black diasporic literature. It illustrates how individual experiences contribute to broader cultural and historical narratives. These studies significantly advance discussions of trauma and memory. However, they continue to prioritise historical and psychological dimensions. As a result, the ethical reconstruction of remembrance remains insufficiently theorised.

This study addresses that gap by conceptualising memory through the metaphor of ashes and light. It argues that remembrance in *Half of a Yellow Sun* does not merely represent trauma or celebrate resilience. Instead, it transforms devastation into a framework for ethical reconstruction. By examining memory as both ruin and illumination, the paper reframes the novel's engagement with trauma as a process of ethical transformation rather than conventional recovery.

**Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative, analytical approach based on close textual reading of selected pages from *Half of a Yellow Sun*. This study draws on trauma theory and postcolonial memory theory, particularly the works of Cathy Caruth, Dominick LaCapra and Michael Rothberg. It examines how narrative structure, characterisation and symbolic imagery construct memory as an ethical process. The analysis focuses on key characters, including Ugwu and Olanna. It explores how fragmented recollection, silence and narrative multiplicity shape representations of trauma and ethical responsibility. Through this interpretative framework, the study demonstrates how memory operates both as a site of rupture and as a medium of reconstruction within postcolonial contexts.

**Theoretical Framework**

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This study employs trauma theory and postcolonial memory studies to analyse how *Half of a Yellow Sun* mediates the relationship between pain and ethical reconstruction. Trauma theory provides a foundation for examining how experiences of violence disrupt narrative coherence and persist through fragmented recollection. Cathy Caruth defines trauma as "the story of a wound that cries out" (Caruth 4). Trauma resists closure and returns through involuntary memory. Her concept of belatedness illuminates the fractured recollections and silences that shape Adichie's characters. Memory in the novel does not signify resolution or complete healing. Instead, it appears as a persistent disturbance that signals the endurance of unresolved violence within consciousness.

While Caruth emphasises the disruptive force of trauma, Dominick LaCapra develops a framework for understanding the possibility of transformation. He distinguishes between "acting out" and "working through" trauma. Acting out involves compulsive repetition of the traumatic event, whereas working through suggests reflective engagement that enables critical distance and gradual reconstruction (LaCapra 144). This distinction is central to Adichie's narrative, where characters move between reliving painful memories and attempting to articulate them. The shift from silence to storytelling and from fragmentation to narration reflects an effort to work through loss. Memory therefore becomes not only a source of injury but also a medium for reconstituting identity. Remembrance acquires an ethical dimension because the past is confronted rather than suppressed.

However, trauma theory as articulated by Caruth and LaCapra emerges largely from Euro-American intellectual contexts. When applied to postcolonial narratives, it requires expansion to address collective and political dimensions of violence. The Biafran Civil War was not solely a psychological rupture but also a national crisis shaped by colonial history and ethnic conflict. Memory in such contexts operates within structures of power, erasure and contested historiography. Postcolonial memory studies therefore emphasise remembrance as resistance to historical silencing and as the reconstruction of marginalised voices.

Michael Rothberg extends this framework through his concept of multidirectional memory. In *Multidirectional Memory* (2009), he argues that memories of violence do not compete for recognition but intersect across cultural and historical boundaries (Rothberg). Memory becomes a dialogical space in which individual suffering interacts with collective histories. Rothberg challenges the view of trauma as purely private and conceptualises remembrance as socially and politically interconnected. This perspective clarifies how the personal memories of characters such as Ugwu and Olanna contribute to the formation of national consciousness. Their recollections are not isolated expressions of grief but part of a broader process of historical narration. Memory thus functions simultaneously as testimony and intervention.

Caruth emphasises traumatic disruption, LaCapra distinguishes between repetition and working through, while Rothberg develops a relational model of multidirectional memory. Together, these perspectives form a layered analytical framework for interpreting Adichie's novel. In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, memory emerges as both destructive remnant and transformative illumination. It preserves the scars of violence while enabling ethical engagement with the past. Through this combined theoretical lens, remembrance can be understood as an active process that links personal loss to collective responsibility. This framework guides the subsequent analysis of how the novel represents memory as both ashes and light, revealing its dual capacity to wound and to reconstruct.

**Memory as Ruin and the Fragments of War and Trauma**

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In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, the Biafran War is reconstructed as an archive of ruin through the fragmented memories of its characters. Recollection in the novel is inseparable from pain, as remembering carries the emotional burden of survival. Memory does not function as a straightforward path to recovery. Instead, it emerges as a fractured and unstable process shaped by guilt, silence and endurance. It is inscribed both in the lived experiences of the characters and in the devastated landscapes they inhabit. Remembering becomes both an obligation and a burden, a necessary confrontation with irreversible loss.

Mehra observes that "this merciless perpetration of violence not only destroys the bodies of victims but also muffles their voices" (5022). This insight reflects Adichie's sustained attention to silenced suffering. The novel constructs memory through fragments that resist closure. Silence does not signal absence. It reveals the difficulty of articulating trauma. Survival often demands suppression, yet the past continues to intrude upon the present. Adichie transforms the conflict between silence and articulation into narrative structure, framing fragility as a form of witnessing. Nwanyanwu and Anasiudu note that

> for Olanna, the massacre of her kinsmen is an historical episode that allows her to bear witness to the senselessness, the horror of the massacre in Kano. (29)

Their reading underscores how memory functions simultaneously as witness and burden. When Olanna returns from Kano, her silence conveys trauma that resists articulation. The scene is constructed not as spectacle but as intimate devastation. Through Olanna, historical violence is internalised as moral consciousness, linking individual grief to communal responsibility.

Cortés Vieco describes this dimension of the novel as "the emotional history of war, which cannot be captured in any nation's annals" (409). This formulation situates Adichie's narrative beyond official historiography. War is experienced through loss, displacement and endurance rather than through nationalist triumph. Memory therefore becomes less a record of fact than an affective reconstruction of lived experience. Fragmented recollections challenge the authority of official archives and foreground subjective history.

Ugwu's experience further illustrates this dynamic. After witnessing violence, he reflects that "he would not remember this man tomorrow because he would not want to" (Adichie 145). His refusal signals the defensive dimension of trauma. Forgetting becomes a temporary strategy of psychic survival. Yet silence does not erase responsibility. Ugwu's later remorse reveals the conflict between repression and ethical accountability. Through him, memory becomes a moral trial rather than a source of consolation. Strehle observes that,

> all of the major characters lose their homes in the war, taking to the roads with thousands of others. At the end, the structures they have considered home are either damaged or inhabited by Nigerians who erase all traces of the Igbo owners. (658)

The destruction of domestic space signifies more than physical loss. It marks the disintegration of belonging. In this context, memory becomes the final repository of continuity. Recollected images and voices preserve fragments of identity in the face of displacement.

Taken together, these critical perspectives illuminate how memory after war is partial and unstable. In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, remembering operates simultaneously as wound and witness. It preserves traces of violence while resisting erasure. Adichie does not attempt to repair the ruins of Biafra. Instead, she renders them visible through narrative reconstruction. Memory thus becomes an ethical act that safeguards human dignity amid historical devastation.

**Light as Renewal and the Ethics of Remembering**

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Adichie transforms recollections of war in *Half of a Yellow Sun* into reflections on ethical renewal. The narrative moves from devastation to illumination and from traumatic silence to ethical awareness. Rather than obscuring suffering, the novel reshapes pain into an ethically charged engagement with the past. The recurring images of the green branch, the yellow sun and the act of writing that concludes the novel signify endurance and continuity. Memory emerges not merely as recall but as moral orientation, linking death to survival. Through carefully structured imagery and colour symbolism, Adichie articulates renewal within historical devastation.

> A woman from the refugee camp dashed into the yard, shouting, waving a green branch. Such a brilliant wet-looking green. (Adichie 411)

This moment occurs after prolonged uncertainty and loss. The green branch functions as a sign of fragile survival. Its brightness interrupts surrounding despair and signals a provisional return of hope. An ordinary gesture becomes symbolically charged, suggesting that renewal can emerge from the margins of suffering. The Biafran flag serves a similar symbolic purpose.

> Odenigbo climbed up to the podium waving his Biafran flag: swaths of red, black, and green and, at the centre, a luminous half of a yellow sun. (Adichie 163)

The yellow sun introduces warmth into a narrative shaped by shadow and scarcity. Adichie transforms political symbolism into emotional resonance. Colour becomes an aesthetic strategy through which devastation is reframed as possibility. The sun does not erase violence. It signifies endurance despite devastation.

Abba argues that the novel "demonstrates the monstrous implication of ethnic profiling and stereotyping in the outbreak of the war" (7). His reading situates Adichie's work within a broader ethical discourse. By exposing the consequences of prejudice and division, the narrative encourages reflective responsibility. Memory here is not passive recollection. It becomes an ethical imperative that demands critical awareness of the forces that produce violence. Etim interprets this dimension through the concept of rememory. According to Etim,

> rememory is, according to Purkayastha, also a strategy for subverting a single narrative voice through the deployment of multiple voices in a story as a means of encouraging polyphony. (5)

Adichie realises this strategy through the intersecting perspectives of Ugwu, Olanna and Richard. The narrative does not privilege a single voice. Each perspective complicates historical representation. The polyphonic structure itself becomes ethical because it resists authoritative closure. Remembrance is thus reframed as dialogue rather than monologue. Wenske observes that,

> through Olanna's return to Igbo faith, and by giving Ugwu the last word as documenter of the Biafran war in *The World Was Silent When We Died*, Adichie accomplishes the remarkable feat of showing us that in spite of war, Igbo things have not completely fallen apart. (84)

Ugwu's authorship transforms silence into historical inscription. Writing becomes an act of reclamation. The embedded text does not merely memorialise loss. It converts absence into narrative presence. Storytelling therefore functions as a practice of ethical remembrance.

The recurring motif of light binds these symbolic gestures together. It connects grief to endurance without denying devastation. The yellow sun, the green branch and Ugwu's manuscript suggest that remembrance can generate moral insight. Adichie does not romanticise suffering. Instead, she constructs an ethics of remembering grounded in empathy, plurality and

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responsibility. Renewal in the novel does not erase ruin. It emerges from sustained engagement with devastation.

**Ashes to Light: The Journey from Destruction to Healing**

*Half of a Yellow Sun* concludes not with spectacle but with gradual restoration. After prolonged violence and displacement, the narrative turns toward reconstruction through ordinary routines and renewed relationships. The novel does not minimise loss. Instead, it suggests that healing unfolds through everyday practices and sustained human connection. Adichie's representation of recovery avoids dramatic resolution. It is measured, restrained and rooted in lived experience. Light reappears not as triumph but as continuity. Healing in the novel is both emotional and ethical, reflecting the capacity to persist despite irreversible loss**.**

The narrative is framed by recurring images of light. Early in the novel, "Sunlight streamed in through the windows, and from time to time, a gentle breeze lifted the curtains" (Adichie 5). This image of calm anticipates the possibility of renewal that returns after the war. Sunlight functions not merely as physical description but as structural symbolism. When Ugwu survives the war and awakens with renewed awareness, "He opened his eyes, overcome by a new wonder, and looked around to make sure it was all real" (Adichie 5), the moment echoes the earlier scene. These parallel images suggest recurring continuity rather than simple closure.

> Anaduaka interprets this movement through the idea of tragic optimism. He writes,
> after the war, Ugwu and the others take up useful ventures as means to personal meanings. Odenigbo, Ugwu, Olanna and Baby return to Nsukka, clear out the dirt in Odenigbo's apartment and gradually resettle into their everyday life, willingly forgetting the injuries and injustices of the past, the loss of friends and relatives, and sustained by the ever-forward spirit of tragic optimism. (137)

Anaduaka's reading highlights the practical dimension of healing. The characters do not erase memory. Instead, they reorganise life around it. Cleaning the apartment symbolises not purification but restoration of inhabitable space. Domestic routine replaces wartime disruption. Recovery therefore emerges from repetition, labour and shared effort rather than dramatic transformation.

Akpome similarly emphasises Adichie's focus on the ordinary. He notes that "she focuses on the minutiae of the violence of the war, the personal tragedies and their lingering traumas" (8). Through close attention to lived experience, the novel renders suffering intimate and specific rather than detached. By foregrounding everyday experiences rather than heroic spectacle, Adichie restores dignity to those shaped by war. Healing in this framework develops through sustained empathy and the capacity to remember without surrendering to bitterness. Trauma remains present, yet it no longer defines the entirety of existence.

Asuzu and Ogonwa observe that "women were hardworking and brave. They never entertained laziness either from fellow women or even men" (34). Their observation underscores the role of women as agents of reconstruction. Olanna, Kainene and the unnamed women in refugee camps sustain communal life through labour and endurance. Recovery is collective rather than individual. Through acts of care, distribution and perseverance, women rebuild fractured social spaces. Renewal thus arises from shared resilience rather than extraordinary acts.

The concluding mood of the novel sustains this restrained vision of endurance. Survivors continue to carry memory, yet their lives are no longer governed exclusively by loss. Light, which appears at the novel's beginning, returns as a sign of continuity rather than resolution. Renewal does not negate devastation. It develops through sustained engagement

with devastation. In this way, Adichie constructs healing as ethical persistence. Memory remains, but it is transformed into a framework for responsibility rather than paralysis. The journey from ashes to light therefore affirms not sentimental hope but the endurance of human dignity within historical rupture.

**Conclusion**

This study examines how Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* reconstructs the memory of the Biafran War as an ethical and transformative process. Through the recurring metaphor of ashes and light, Adichie presents memory not merely as a recollection of trauma but as a moral practice that confronts violence while sustaining human dignity. The novel demonstrates that remembrance holds destruction and renewal in tension without allowing one to eclipse the other. In doing so, Adichie reconfigures memory from passive recall into active ethical engagement.

By analysing memory as ruin, this study has shown that trauma persists through fragmentation, silence and embodied recollection. Adichie's depiction of war resists heroic narration and instead foregrounds lived experience. Memory preserves suffering, yet it also bears witness to histories marginalised in official narratives. In its movement toward light and renewal, the novel reframes remembrance as an act of responsibility. Through a multi-voiced narrative structure and symbolic imagery, Adichie constructs a space in which silenced voices recover presence. Healing therefore emerges not as the erasure of trauma but as the capacity to live alongside trauma without surrendering to resentment or historical erasure.

This study brings trauma theory and postcolonial memory theory into dialogue. It demonstrates that Adichie's narrative extends these frameworks beyond individual psychology to collective historical consciousness. In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, memory operates simultaneously as wound and reconstruction. It situates private grief within national history and transforms suffering into a medium for ethical reflection. Adichie thus challenges reductive interpretations of trauma as paralysis and instead presents remembrance as a form of ethical endurance.

This reading contributes to debates in trauma studies and postcolonial literary criticism by emphasising the dialectical relationship between destruction and renewal. Adichie's work shows that ethical remembrance does not eliminate violence or depend on triumphant resolution. Rather, it arises from sustained engagement with historical rupture. The movement from ashes to light illustrates that memory sustains community, responsibility and dignity in post-war contexts.

Future research may pursue comparative analyses of ethical remembrance in other African post-conflict narratives. Further studies could also examine the relationship between oral tradition, cultural memory and narrative reconstruction across Adichie's wider corpus. Such inquiries would deepen understanding of how literature mediates trauma and reimagines history as a space for ethical reflection.

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