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The Biafra War: Cultural Memory in two novels of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Chinelo Okparanta

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Abstract

Recently new novels about the Biafra war have appeared, proving the ongoing impact of the Nigerian civil war on writers' interest, and the importance of memory in our life. For all these reasons, I decided to write the present thesis on how memory function in a literary work. The objective is to analyse the literary representation of the Biafra war, with a special focus on individual and collective memory production through two fictional novels: *Half of a Yellow Sun*, by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and *Under the Udala Trees*, by Chinelo Okparanta.

In analysing the literary representations of Biafra in the light of memory studies, I have identified two levels of memory: literary characters' memory and writers' memory. Focusing on the level of the memory of the characters, I explored what the characters remember about the Biafra war both when the war is over and when it is still in progress, and what strategies they use to remember or to forget painful memories of the war. What emerged through this first level of analysis is how Adichie and Okparanta have offered narratives focused not only on accounts of the war, but also on feelings and emotions. Moreover, the strategies of remembering and of forgetting represent tools of survival, and they are not in a relationship of exclusion.

Focusing on the level of writers' memory, I explored the perspectives used by Adichie and Okparanta to narrate and remember the Biafra war: a perspective from below, focused on ordinary people and on their daily lives; a female perspective which represents a novelty in a literary landscape dominated by male writers; the danger of a single story and its risk to create hegemonic narratives; the fictional perspective as a way to enrich a historical event with suggestive details fruit of writers' imagination; the *Afropolitan* perspective and the greater openness of mind of the new generation of African writers.

Keywords: Cultural Memory, Adichie, Okparanta, Biafra, *Afropolitanism*

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Chapter 1

1.1 Objective and research questions

In the Nigerian literature, the Biafra war has been a fertile ground for the expression of many writers. The Nigerian civil war is said to have led to the birth of a new literary genre, exploited and investigated by many writers, both for fictional and non-fictional novels. Most of the books written on Biafra were produced during or shortly after the outbreak of the war, but recently new novels have appeared, proving the ongoing impact of the Biafra war on writers' interest. Some historical and socio-political coincidences can offer a first explanation for this interest. In 2017 was the 50th anniversary of the outbreak of the civil war. However, still today, many rumours hover over new secessionist demands, and young generations still dream of independence from Nigeria. The war caused more than a million casualties, but today there are new generations in the east who would like their part of the country to secede. In this perspective, the production of new novels about Biafra seems to address political and socio-cultural dynamics inserted in the present context of Nigeria. This connection between past and present has triggered my thesis. The fact that contemporary writers have felt the need to narrate an event that happened 50 years ago is an indicator of the importance that memory has in our life. In fact, all societies have always activated strategies to recollect events belonging to the past, in order not to lose track of them and to affirm and reinvigorate their identity according to a present situation. Pierre Nora, one of the most prominent scholars in Memory Studies, has also stressed the importance of the present in recollecting the memory of the past, arguing that

memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived (Nora, 1989: 8).

This means that memory is a process that lives of the present and in the present, nourishing itself of the changes that occur in our societies. Astrid Erll also confirms the connection between the past and the present, pointing out how

re-remembering is an act of assembling available data that takes place in the present. Versions of the past change with every recall, in accordance with the changed present situation. Individual and collective memories are never a mirror image of the past, but rather an expressive indication of the needs and interests of the person or group doing the remembering in the present (Erll, 2001: 8).

Literature is one way for investigating the production of memory. Erll and Rigney suggest that “acts of literary remembrance contribute in a very specific manner to the ongoing production and reproduction of cultural memory, as well as to our reflection on that memory” (Erll, Rigney, 2006: 113). For all these reasons, I decided to write this thesis on how memory and its levels and perspectives function in a literary work. The objective of my thesis is to analyse the literary representation of the Biafra war, with a special focus on individual and collective “memory” production through two fictional novels: *Half of a Yellow Sun*, by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, published for the first time in 2006 (Adichie, 2017), and *Under the Udala Trees*, by Chinelo Okparanta, published for the first time in 2015 (Okparanta, 2017).

In analysing the literary representations of Biafra in the light of memory studies, two levels of memory emerged: literary characters’ memory and writers’ memory. According to these two levels of memory, some research questions have oriented my work.

Focusing on the level of characters’ memory:

-What do the characters remember about the Biafra war, both when the war is over, and when it is still in progress?

-What strategies do they use to remember, or to forget painful memories of the war?

-What do they want to communicate through these strategies?

Focusing on the level of writers’ memory:

- What "perspectives"¹ do Adichie and Okparanta use to tell and remember the Biafra war?

-What do they want to communicate to the reader through these perspectives?

In the process of answering these questions, I will bear in mind the words of Pierre Nora that underlines: “the task of remembering makes everyone their own historian” and “the demand for history has thus largely overflowed the circle of professional historians” (Nora, 1989: 15). Literature is not part of this “circle”, it does not constitute a properly historical tool for reconstructing a past event. However, its power to recollect and represent memory is undeniable.

1.2 Criteria adopted in the selection of the novels

¹ With the term "perspective" I indicate some approaches that have oriented and influenced the way in which writers have told their stories. To give some examples, a perspective can be telling a story focusing on ordinary people and their daily lives, or narrating a story through a fictional novel rather than a non-fictional one.

The first criterion used to select the novels is the one using only fictional novels in order to benefit of some advantages. Erll argues that a fictional novel enjoys numerous privileges, such as the possibility of inserting facts and stories that have not really happened, but they are the result of the writer's imagination (Erll, 2011: 150). In this way, a fictional novel becomes an instrument capable of “enriching” an event and “going beyond” it, in order to show not only of facts and data, but also people and of emotions, and to make them suggestive to capture the reader's attention.

Secondly, I decided to focus on novels written by the writers of the second generation who did not experience directly Biafra civil war, in order to show that a conflict, even if not personally experienced, always leaves traces in the individual memory of a person and in the collective memory of a group. Thirdly, I wanted to look at the conflict through the lens of contemporary and female writers, in order to highlight two angles. First, contemporary novels give me the opportunity to emphasize the memory's dimension because of a bigger temporal distance between Biafra's war years and now. Secondly, female writers' point of view can offer a different perspective, since most of the novels about Biafra war were written by men.

The fourth criterion has been dictated by the desire to look at the production of Biafra's cultural memory not only through a temporal and a gender dimension, but also through a spatial one. In particular, I decided to focus on *Afropolitan* writers, that is writers with African roots who do not live, or occasionally live in Africa. The purpose is to show how *Afropolitanism* can be considered a new perspective in the representation of Biafra memory.

1.3 State of research

The number of novels set during Biafra war is huge. One of the most recent and exhaustive account of the literary production about Biafra war is *Writing the Nigeria-Biafra War* by Toyin Falola and Ogechukwu Ezekwem. The book was first published in 2016, so it is able to offer a complete and a chronological spectrum of the novels about Nigeria civil war. One of the most important results of Falola and Ezekwem's work is to give space and voice to the literary production of women, and to examine the female participation during the war and its implication in a national space. In this way the authors, stressing the artistic production of women as an integral part of the analysis of the literary production about the Nigerian civil war, offered me an important perspective in writing my thesis, that is of further investigating the literary production on the Biafra war through a female lens. Another important aspect of this study that has oriented my criteria in selecting novels, is that of subtyping the literary production on Biafra war in fictional and non-fictional accounts, stressing how the first ones are mainly focused on the war's atrocities and sufferings, while the second ones put their

attention on biographies, personal accounts and historical facts. The study also analyses foreign authors' works, taking into account not only a temporal dimension, but also a spatial one. In particular, Falola and Ezekwem focus on some journalists, such as Frederick Forsyth, John de St. Jorre, John Hatch, H.G. Hanbury, Geoffrey Birch, Dominic St. George and Walter Schwarz, who stress the humanitarian aspect of the war and the involvement of non-African nations in the conflict (Falola, Ezekwem, 2016: 3)². Consequently, the Biafra war is represented as an extremely captivating topic, able to feed the interest of the most varied categories.

Another important contribution from Toyin Falola and Ogechukwu Ezekwem's book is that the authors not only review the heterogeneous literary accounts of the conflict, but they also offer the reader a comprehensive review of other books and publications that, like *Writing the Nigeria-Biafra War*, have analysed the literary production about the Biafra war. Marion Pape's *Gender Palava: Nigerian Women Writing War*³ analyses fictional accounts of the war from a gendered perspective and it puts the attention on "women's contribution to the Nigeria-Biafra war scholarship, a realm that was significantly dominated by men until recently" (Falola, Ezekwem, 2016: 4). In particular, Pape has stressed some aspects that were fundamental in my analysis. Firstly, Pape has emphasized how the production of female novels about the war has questioned the long exclusion practices that had prevented women from writing novels about the Nigerian civil war (Pape, 2005: 232). Secondly, Pape has pointed out that many women writers constructed pragmatic female characters, such as women who transported goods across the frontline or women who went with enemy soldiers to obtain favours (Pape, 2005: 238). Finally, Pape has also highlighted women's hesitation in invading a male universe, stressing how many women writers have explicitly thanked important male writers in their acknowledgments or have implicitly referred to them in the pages of their novels in order to stress the connection between their texts and male works (Pape, 2005: 236). All these aspects are also present in the novels selected for this thesis, confirming the possibility of tracing some trends in the literary production of female writers about the Biafra war.

Chima Korie's *The Nigeria-Biafra War: Genocide and the Politics of Memory*⁴ "comprises a

² This aspect has been particularly useful to me because, as we will see in the chapters of analysis, both novels dedicate some pages to the description of the foreign press during the war. Adichie, in particular, also questions in the authorship issue about those who have the right to tell a story and the risk of homogenizing a story by offering an impartial and limited version of it.

³ For more information see Pape, M. (2011), *Gender Palava: Nigerian Women Writing War*, Trier: Wissenschaftlicher.

⁴ For more information see Korie, C. (2012), ed., *The Nigeria-Biafra War: Genocide and the Politics of*

collection of essays that not only examines the non-military aspects of the war but also evaluates the scholarly discussion on genocide against the Igbo and prior to and during the Nigeria-Biafra War” (Falola, Ezekwem, 2016: 5). Korieh’s book, therefore, not only revisits the war in a perspective of memory, but it places this memory on a collective dimension, focusing attention on a specific group, the Igbo one. In fact, the seven chapters of the second part of the book are devoted to the topic of war memory, and the contributors stress many attempts by Nigerian government to delete the Igbo memory, for example persecuting people discovered with symbols of Biafra. Korieh’s book revolves around the theme of suppressing the memory of a group, and this aspect has pushed me to analyse the novels also on a collective level of memory, in this case that of Igbo.⁵

Finally, to complete the outline of the state of research, Craig W. Mc Luckie’s *Nigerian Civil War Literature: Seeking an ‘Imagined Community’*⁶ analyses five fictive works focusing on the ideas of community identity, while Chinyere Nwahunanya’s *A Harvest from Tragedy*⁷ takes into account fictional works but also drama and memoirs.

1.4 Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework for this thesis starts from the need to understand why studying memory, and what are its benefits and advantages. According to Astrid Erll, the importance of memory is based on the fact that memory becomes an “all-encompassing sociocultural phenomenon” and an “interdisciplinary phenomenon” (Erll, 2011: 1). In fact, memory is an undisputed protagonist in our society, and it is now a tool to investigate the changes that characterize our societies and how societies evolve during the time. Moreover, it is now involved as analytical category in many disciplines, from sociology to history, from psychology to religious studies, from philosophy to literature. Therefore, the importance of memory has led to the birth of a new field of study, the Memory Studies, whose main objective is to analyse the manifestation of memory in culture and the ways in which culture

Memory, New York: Cambria Press.

⁵ One of the fundamental aspect of the chapter about the first level of memory, the characters’ one, will be based on the distinction between an individual dimension and a collective dimension of memory.

⁶ For more information see Mc Luckie, C. W. (1990), *Nigerian Civil War Literature: Seeking an ‘Imagined Community’*, Lewiston: Edwin Mellen.

⁷ For more information see Nwahunanya, C. (1997) ed., *A Harvest from Tragedy: Critical Perspectives on Nigerian Civil War Literature*, Owerri: Spring eld.

constructs and transmits memories. This means not only tracing a history of the memory itself, but also a history of the manifestations of the memory in our cultures (Erll, 2011: 13). Among these manifestations, literature occupies a privileged and unique position. Erll notices how literature can be considered as a “medium” of memory, so as “part of memory culture, entangled in its social, medial, and mental dimensions” (Erll, 2011: 171). This means recognizing the capacity of literature to reconstruct past events and to make this process of reconstruction observable. In this sense, following Pierre Nora’s concept of *lieux de mémoire*, a novel can be considered as a site of memory, so as a medium through which it is possible to activate and observe acts of remembering (Nora, 1989).

Another important contribution to my theoretical framework is Maurice Halbwachs’s theory about the intersection between an individual level of memory and a collective level of memory. According to Halbwachs, “one may say that the individual remembers by placing himself in the perspective of the group, but one may also affirm that the memory of the group realizes and manifests itself in individual memories” (Halbwachs, 1992:40). This means that the collective and the individual dimensions of memory are in a relationship of mutual influence. In fact, the recollection made by the individual is influenced by the values and beliefs of the groups to which he belongs, groups that the individual in turn contributes to build.

As Adichie and Okparanta focus on ordinary people in their novels, the concept of “history from below” of Amitav Ghosh, Indian anthropologist, represents another important contribution. In *Sea of poppies*, set during the Opium War, Ghosh provides the readers with a huge range of ordinary characters: merchants, indentured labourers, lascars, sailors and convicts. Through the abyss of Indian Ocean, Amitav Ghosh was able to create a great example of history from below, that, according to The Institute of Historical Research, “seeks to take as its subjects ordinary people, and concentrate on their experiences and perspectives, contrasting itself with the stereotype of traditional political history and its focus on the actions of ‘great men’” (Cobb et al., 2008). Moreover, Amitav Ghosh went through history, but he did not analyse it through a historical method, but with a fictional novel. In “The novel in Africa”, through the words of one of the characters, Coetzee offers us a possible answer underlining that “like history too, the novel is an investigation into the power of character and the power of circumstance” (Coetzee, 1999: 4). Therefore, both Ghosh and Coetzee conceptualize novels as powerful tools to look at history and to understand society better.

A female perspective will be another *file rouge* of my analysis; this is the reason why the “muted group theory”, developed by the social anthropologist Edwin Ardener represents another key concept of my theoretical framework. The main point stressed by Ardener was that, although half of the population was made up of women, the “symbolic weight” of female models was often ignored (Ardner, 1975: 3). Starting from this anthropological research, I will show how Adichie and

Okparanta have expressed their “symbolic weight” through literary works, manifesting their gender as capable of telling a war that was considered a male prerogative in the narrative production of Biafra.

This last assumption is also connected to Adichie’s concept of “the danger of a single story”. The main point of this concept is that stories about people and places can be misleading, offering a definitive and unchangeable version of them. The main consequence is to create preconceptions and prejudices that run the risk of sedimenting themselves as true and indisputable, even when they are not. Adichie has also discussed the ways in which colonialism brought with it the power to tell a definitive, single story about the world and about people.⁸ In a TED talk Adichie has pointed out that

the consequence of the single story is this: it robs people of their dignity. It makes our recognition of an equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar [...] Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity (Adichie, 2009).

In this same talk, Adichie also ironize about an announcement which referred to Africa as a country, and not as a continent, arguing that: "I still get quite irritable when Africa is referred to as a country; the most recent example being my otherwise wonderful flight from Lagos two days ago, in which there was an announcement on the Virgin flight about the charity work in India, Africa and other countries" (Adichie, 2009). Obviously, the danger of a single story also fits into a memory perspective because remembering can be victim of a partial and incomplete reconstruction of the past.

Finally, since the literary nature of my thesis, it is also necessary to understand the importance of studying literature. In the book “Why study literature”, Iversen, Nielsen and Alber argued that literature is connected to personal improvements, it informs us about how society works, it investigates people and their activities (Iversen, Nielsen, Alber, 2011: 14-15). Moreover, it is impossible to deny how novels take possession of us and how we take possession of them. This is the power, but also the responsibility of literature. It can help us to understand society more clearly, but it can also offer a single story of it. How to avoid this danger? Talking about historical works, on one side, and novels on the other one, Amitav Ghosh underlines that “the difference is between observing the flow of a river from the shore and from within the waters: the direction of the current is the same in both cases, but a swimmer, or a fish has, at every moment, a million different choices (Ghosh,

⁸ *Half of a Yellow Sun* is full of references about the effects of colonialism on African societies, for example linguistic problems, or issues linked to identity and politics.

2014). Recalling Ghosh words', I think that literature, as a swimmer or a fish, has several choices and it can offer us a lot of perspectives. The most important thing is to not focus only on a perspective, but to analyse all the colours of the spectrum.

1.5 Research method and sources

The objective of my thesis is to analyse the representation of Biafra in a perspective of memory, according to two levels of analysis: the characters' memory and the writers' memory. The first level of analysis allows us to observe memory, first looking at what characters remember about Biafra war, both when the war is over and when it is still in progress. To do this, I divided the memories of the characters in individual memories and in collective memories, and I selected the passages in the novels that show what characters remember about war in both dimensions. Secondly, the first level of analysis also allows us to look at what strategies characters use to remember, or to forget painful memories of the war. Even in this case, I selected the passages of the novels linked to the representation of strategies of remembering and forgetting activated by characters. Both purposes will be achieved using theoretical concepts of memory, especially Erll's and Halbwachs' ones that I explained in the theoretical framework. On the second level of analysis I will focus on what perspectives and strategies Adichie and Okparanta have used to tell and remember Biafra war in their novels. To do this, I have identified some of the most recurrent perspectives found in their narratives, such as a memory from below, a fictional memory and an *Afropolitan* perspective. Using these perspectives, I will analyse the way writers have recollected Biafra war and its memory, using theoretical concepts discussed both in the theoretical framework and in chapter 2.

Half of a Yellow Sun by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and *Under the Udala Trees* by Chinelo Okparanta are the primary sources of my thesis. I will also use secondary sources and previous literary research about the memory's function and meaning, and memory's representation in literature; history of Biafra's war; contemporary African literature in English, with a focus on language dilemma; female writing about Biafra and the phenomenon of *Afropolitanism*.

1.7 Structure of the thesis

Chapter 1 constitutes the theoretical and methodological background, in which I outline the objective, the research questions, the criteria used to select the novels, the previous works made on the literary representation of Biafra war, the theoretical framework, the sources and the methodology. In chapter

2 I provide a brief account about: history of Biafra war; a general overview about linguistic problems linked to contemporary African literature in English, an analysis of the perspective of *Afropolitanism* and its application on my case study; a discussion about exclusionary practices linked to women's writing about Biafra; the novels' plot and main narrative features. Chapter 3 represents the first core chapter in which I will analyse the selected novels according to the first level of analysis of memory: the characters' memory. In chapter 4 I will focus on the second level of analysis of memory: the writers' memory. In the conclusion, I will summarize the findings of my analysis linking them to the objective and to the research questions.

Chapter 2

2.1 Brief history of the Biafra war

As Chibuike Uche underlines, the origin of Nigeria civil war is linked to the British government and to its decision to amalgamate Southern and Northern Nigeria, in fact, “despite their proximity, their peoples, religions and cultures were different”, and these differences have led to the creation of a state “with strong regional governments and a weak centre” (Uche, 2008: 115). When Nigeria achieved independence in 1960, it presented itself further divided into three main regions, according to ethnic groups. In the North, there were the Hausa-Fulani, in the West the Yoruba, and in the East the Igbo. In addition to ethnic groups, Nigeria was also shaped both by religious criteria, since the South was mainly Christian while the North was mainly Muslim, and by economic reasons, given that the South possessed relevant resources of oil. In a short time, the oil and other commodities caused numerous rivalries among the ethnic groups, and the fracture between the North and the South of the country became increasingly evident. The result of this fracture was the isolation of the South-Eastern region (Heerten, Mosse, 2014: 172-173).

On January 15, 1966, on the basis of a charge of electoral fraud, some sections of the Nigerian army gave rise to a coup and the General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi, an Igbo officer, became President of Nigeria. Ironsi was immediately accused of promoting Igbo officers at the expense of Yoruba and Hausa officers. After six months, the Northern states organized a counter-coup, which brought Lieutenant Colonel Yakubu Gowon to power. Ethnic tensions led to massacres of the Christian Igbo minorities present in the Northern regions, and the massacres pushed the Eastern Region to ask for more independence (Heerten, Mosse, 2014: 173).

After these episodes, on May 30, 1967, the colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu, military governor of the Southeast of Nigeria, officially declared the secession of the Republic of Biafra. According to Oyeniyi, “Ojukwu made it clear that given the killing of Igbos in Northern Nigeria and the inability of the government to bring the situation under control, the Igbos would secede from Nigeria”, and on 6 July the civil war officially started (Oyeniyi, 2016: 122).

One of the first aspects that characterized the conflict was the opposition between a legitimate party, the Nigerian government, and a non-legitimate party, the Biafran rebels. In fact, the recognized regime of Gowon, since the beginning of the war, had managed to obtain support and international aid. On the other hand, the Biafra government was forced to use illegal markets and activities, in order to obtain the necessary weapons to fight. Furthermore, Heerten and Mosse highlight how “governments of the global South were particularly hesitant in giving support to Biafrans. As many

of them faced separatist movements at home, they were adamantly opposed to what they understood as illegitimate secession rather than the legitimate exercise of the Biafrans' rights to self-determination" (Heerten, Mosse, 2014: 175).

Along with political and economic issues, Biafra war was also linked to a dramatic humanitarian crisis that allowed the secessionists to gain resonance in the international arena. Dramatic images of children ravaged by the famine quickly reached every part of the world thanks to shocking photos published in several newspapers. Voluntary organizations, mainly the Christian ones, were immediately activated to provide the population involved in the conflict with food and basic necessities. The humanitarian crisis became one of main features of this conflict and, as Heerten and Mosse have underlined,

in the summer of 1968, contemporaries around the globe witnessed the emergence of a new 'third world' icon: the 'Biafran babies'. Readers and audiences in the west in particular were confronted with photographs of starving children in the secessionist Republic of Biafra, which made headlines for months. For various commentators, the Biafran crisis marks the onset of a new age of humanitarian catastrophe broadcast by modern media (Heerten, Mosse, 2014: 176).

In May of the same year, the main port city of the Biafran state, Port Harcourt, fell into the hands of governmental forces, further weakening the Biafran front, already precarious and unstable. However, the dramatic humanitarian crisis that was starving the population push other countries to give support to the Biafran front.⁹

Nevertheless, the material support and the political recognition of the Republic of Biafra by some countries were not sufficient to favour the secessionists. At the end of 1969, the Nigerian government forces finally resumed the situation, organizing a final attack against the Biafran enclave. At the beginning of 1970, Ojukwu and some of his followers fled to Ivory Coast. After some 30 months of action, on January 15, 1970, the remaining secessionist regime decided to give up and to surrender (Heerten, Mosse, 2014: 176).

⁹ Rebels received support from Julius Nyerere's Tanzania who recognized the secessionist state and its dramatic humanitarian crisis. Gabon, Ivory Coast and Zambia and 'Papa Doc' Chevalier's Haiti made the same decision. The *Estado Novo* (the dictatorship in Portugal) and the South African and Rhodesian apartheid regimes also supported the Biafran secessionists, as well as the De Gaulle government (Heerten, Mosse, 2014: 176).

2.2 Contemporary African literature in English: the language dilemma

Colonialism has created in Africa a multilingual scenario in which local languages and the languages of the colonizer have often been involved in a conflictual relationship. Independence has exacerbated this situation, and Tageldin underlines how many African countries were forced to choose between their local languages and the languages of the colonizers (Tageldin, 2009: 486-487). Many African novelists rehabilitated native languages as “a statement of independence from the Eurocentric homogenization of language and discourse (Baaqeel, 2015: 144). Others instead have decided to use the colonial languages, such as English, because they “found English as a world language” which could facilitate and accelerate the emergence of their works to the global literary market (Sadeghi, 2014: 53).

In *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe, the father of African literature, has used the English language alongside with Igbo words and expressions. In this way, he has rejected an either/or proposition, creating a “continuum” in which English and Igbo “cohabit and interact” (Ben Salem, 2015: 26). As Achebe, Adichie and Okparanta have also used the language of the colonizers, without resisting the temptation to display also their native languages as a statement of resistance and as a proof of “language appropriation” (Ben Salem, 2015: 25). This means that they have not just adopted the English language, but they have interpreted it in a personal way. Irele has also underlined this process of appropriation by writers, calling it “reinterpretation” (Irele, 2001: 13). In fact, when a writer uses two languages belonging to two different cultures, he creates a new space. In this space, the writer gives life to a hybrid language through a personal interpretation of his/her own language and the foreign one.

Winckler suggests that “language is the crystallization point for conflicts arising from the colonial situation” (Winckler, 432) but, using a language in which two traditions are converged together, these writers “de-crystallize” the language as a fluid concept. In fact, a language cannot be seen as something monolithic and immutable. It changes, following the changes that characterize our societies. Therefore, de-crystallizing a language means realizing that it can evolve, for example through the meeting of different traditions and cultures.

Without forgetting colonialism’s violence and disadvantages, Achebe has also recognized its advantages, such as the English language, arguing that colonialism

did bring together many peoples that had hitherto gone their several ways. And it gave them a language with which to talk to one another. If it failed to give them a song, it at least gave them a tongue, for sighing. [...] English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will

have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings (Achebe, 1964).

In this way, Chinua Achebe has motivated the decision to write his novels in English. However, “it will have to be a new English”, in which Igbo words and expressions should not be seen as a silent dissent, but as an integral part of a new and hybrid language. In this way, according to Irele, Achebe and many others have activated a process of “transposition” intersecting African linguistic and cultural features with European models (Irele, 2001: 16-17).

Talking about languages, multiculturalism and nation-building in Nigeria, George Alao, Yoruba, a language teacher at the *Institut National des Langues and Civilisations Orientales*, has described Nigeria as a classical multilingual mosaic. Ethnic and religious diversities, dozens of ancient cultures and hundreds of living languages, a millenary tradition of oral and written literature, are clear examples of the impossibility to build a homogeneous analysis. The result is a multi-linguistic space in which the language is not just a language. The colonial legacy influences also the present linguistic spectrum, and the English dilemma is still alive in Nigeria. English is the official language, so it is the language of administration and education and the language of power, press and Parliament. Alao has also pointed out its advantages: using English is a way to remove the fear of ethnic domination, suspicion and marginalization; it is seen as a source of self-enhancement, socio-political empowerment and access to education and job opportunities; it enables Nigeria to join a globalized economy and community.¹⁰ This means that, today, in Nigeria, English represents the language of power, and this is evident in the field of literature as well. Krishnan has also confirmed English authority, underling how

for contemporary African literature, English has become still more entrenched as the de facto language of communication through the prevalence of prizes given only to works available in English, a critical field that is increasingly monolingual [...] and a publishing sector dominated by London and New York. While this situation is unlikely to change any time soon, its very existence points to the necessity to recall the politics of language as an inherent facet of the politics of re(-)presentation in writing Africa in a global context (Krishnan, 2014: 35-36).

¹⁰ George Alao’s lecture about languages, multiculturalism and nation-building in Nigeria, December 5, 2017. The lecture was organized for the Master in African Studies during the course “The Dynamics of African Societies” by Lars Berge.

To resume, since my thesis focuses on a literary analysis in a memory perspective, I am interested in how the linguistic question relates to memory. My point of view is that Adichie and Okparanta did not limit themselves to remember the “historical memory” of Biafra, but also the “cultural memory” of their people, revisiting their tradition, for example, through Igbo expressions, words and proverbs. This explains their presence also in a memory’s perspective, linking them with the traditions of writers’ ancestors. Evocative is Okparanta’s gratitude when, in *Under the Udala Trees*’ Acknowledgments she thanks her elders “for the proverbs that carry on to this day” (Okparanta, 2017: 328).

2.3 What does it mean to be an *Afropolitan* writer?

Adichie and Okparanta can be defined *Afropolitan* writers. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie was born in Abba, Nigeria, and she did her first cycle of studies in Nsukka, before going to the United States to complete them. Chinelo Okparanta was born and raised in Port Harcourt, and then she moved to America where she finished her studies. Therefore, they both have African roots, even if they do not live or partially live in Africa. In them, many traditions cohabit, and the same interplay between different traditions is also present in their novels. In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Olanna and Kainene, the two main characters, have studied abroad and have received a European education. Interesting is also the scene in which Adichie describes the pride of a grandmother towards her nephew when he comes back after studying abroad:

The grandmother turned to Olanna. ‘He is the first of our village to go overseas, and our people have prepared a dance for him. The dance troupe will meet us in Ikeduru’. She smiles proudly to show brown teeth. Her accent was even thicker; it was difficult to make out everything she said. ‘My fellow women are jealous, but is it my fault that their sons have empty brains and my own son won the withe people’s scholarship?’ (Adichie, 2017: 27-28).

However, *Afropolitanism* cannot be reduced only to European education. Many scholars point out how it refers to the Africans’ new attitude to a new physical and mental openness to the world. Achille Mbembe speaks of a dispersion and of a historical phenomenon of worlds in movement. For Mbembe, *Afropolitanism* means a “way of belonging to the world, of being in the world and inhabiting it” that implies “cultural, historical and aesthetic sensitivity” (Mbembe, 2007: 28). He defines *Afropolitanism* not as a static condition, but as a continuous process, given by “the awareness of interweaving of the here and there”, by the “presence of the elsewhere in the here and vice versa”, by the ability “to domesticate the unfamiliar” (Mbembe, 2007: 27). He looks at *Afropolitanism* as an expression of

exchange and communication between different realities, which find a common point in a greater openness to the world.

Tayie Selasi, considered as one of the scholars who has deeply discussed the phenomenon of *Afropolitanism*, states that “nothing is neatly black or white” and “to be anything (white, black, American, African) is largely to act the part” (Selasi, 2013: 529-530). Selasi therefore refers to the concept of *Afropolitanism* as difficult to place in a pure category or give a single definition. This is the reason why she does not try to define *Afropolitanism*, but she focuses on what *Afropolitanism* implies and what characterizes it. According to Selasi, “what most typifies the *Afropolitan* consciousness is the refusal to oversimplify: the effort to understand what is ailing in Africa alongside the desire to honour what is wonderful, unique” (Selasi, 2013: 529). Selasi creates a balance between what is old and what is new, between what is “purely African” and what is not. She appeals to a new mental elasticity, and she looks at the new generation of Africans as an emblem in which all this can be fulfilled. In, “Bye-Bye Barbar”¹¹, considered the *Afropolitan* Manifesto, she writes:

they (read: we) are Afropolitans—the newest generation of African emigrants, coming soon, or collected already, at a law firm/chem lab/jazz lounge near you. You’ll know us by our funny blend of London fashion, New York jargon, African ethics, and academic successes. Some of us are ethnic mixes, e.g. Ghanaian and Canadian, Nigerian and Swiss; others merely cultural mutts: American accent, European affect, African ethos. Most of us are multilingual: in addition to English and a Romantic language or two, we understand some indigenous language(s) and speak a few urban vernaculars. There is at least one place on the Continent to which we tie our sense of self: be it a nation-state (Ethiopia), a city (Ibadan), or an auntie’s kitchen. Then there’s the G8 city or two (or three) that we know like the backs of our hands, and the institutions (corporate/academic) that know us for our famed work ethic. We are Afropolitans—not citizens, but Africans, of the world. (Selasi, 2013: 528).

According to Makokha, both Mbembe and Selasi describe “a novel critical term, at whose core are questions of borders and spaces of new African identities” (Makokha, 2011: 17).

Because of the difficulty to give a univocal definition of *Afropolitanism*, I decided to consider it not as a definition, but as a new perspective in analysing how Adichie and Okparanta have represented the Biafra war. Adichie’s references to the importance of education are clear calls to improve education in Nigeria. Okparanta's homosexual story comes from the awareness that Nigeria

¹¹ For more information see Selasi, T. (2013), “Bye-Bye Barbar.” *Callaloo* 36.3. pp. 528-530. Originally published as Tuakli-Wosornu, T. (2009), “Bye-Bye Barbar (Or What is Afropolitan?).” *Afropolis*.

needs to keep up with human rights issues. Would she dare to write such a story fifty years ago? How much has her *Afropolitan* character given her the freedom to deal with the problematic topic of homophobia, still widespread in Nigeria? The question will be better discussed in the last chapter. For the moment, keeping in mind the key concepts above, we can accept Chielozone Eze's view of *Afropolitans* as new citizens "committed to openness" (Eze, 2016: 117). Can this "openness" be considered a new perspective in narrating Biafra?

2.4 Writing the Nigeria-Biafra War: a long history of exclusion

The production of novels about the Biafra war is very wide. However, the participation of female writers in this production is almost non-existent, and the civil war was considered for a long time a male prerogative. This tradition of exclusion has led female writers to restrain themselves from narrating the Biafra war, and many women have felt the need to create a connection with male writers who had preceded them. Adichie opens *Half of a Yellow Sun* with a poem by Chinua Achebe:

Today I see it still –
Dry, wire-thin in sun and dust of the dry months –
Headstone on tiny debris of passionate courage.¹²

Okparanta also pays homage to the father of African literature in a chapter of *Under the Udala Trees*, through a discussion between two students: "What about *Things Fall Apart*? Have you read it yet? We will probably have to write an essay on it'. She waved her hand at me as if to brush the question away. As she did, she kicked off her skirt and said, 'Everyone knows the story of Okonkwo'" (Okparanta, 2017: 139).

But, what is interesting is not only a dialogic interaction between men's and women's writing, but the fact that women writers have also shown the desire to "engage with each other's text" pushing "the emergence of a female literary tradition" (Stratton, 1994: 175). Having a look at the Acknowledgments in *Under the Udala Trees*, along with many names, the names of NoViolet Bulawayo, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and other female writers also appear in the list of Okparanta's recognition. This is the emblem of the creation of a female network through which women want to affirm that they perceive the war with the "same interest" as men.

The creation of a "female front" inevitably involves issues related to feminism. Among

¹² Chinua Achebe, from "Mango Seedling" in *Christmas in Biafra and Other Poems*.

contemporary female African writers, Adichie is the one who has most expressed what the term “feminism” means to her. In her seminal TED talk, she argued:

I decided to call myself a happy feminist. Then an academic, a Nigerian woman told me that feminism was not our culture and that feminism wasn't African, and that I was calling myself a feminist because I had been corrupted by ‘Western books’. Which amused me, because a lot of my early readings were decidedly unfeminist. I think I must have read every single Mills & Boon romance published before I was sixteen. And each time I tried to read those books called the feminist classics, I'd get bored, and I really struggled to finish them. But anyway, since feminism was un-African, I decided that I would now call myself a happy African feminist. (Adichie, 2012).

The most interesting aspect of Adichie’s declaration is how much the definition of feminism relates to her *Afropolitan* identity. Adichie feels the need to define herself as a “happy feminist”, but she also perceives the accusations of a Western corruption that have forced her to add the term “African” to the feminist definition. This highlights how problematic the feminist question is, especially when it refers to *Afropolitan* women writers. In the same talk, Adichie also focuses on the concept of gender, arguing that,

today we live in a vastly different world. The person more likely to lead is not the physically stronger person; it is the more creative person, the more intelligent person, the more innovative person, and there are no hormones for those attributes. A man is as likely as a woman to be intelligent, to be creative, to be innovative. We have evolved; but it seems to me that our ideas of gender had not evolved” [...] Gender as it functions today is a grave injustice. The problem with gender, is that it prescribes how we should be rather than recognizing how we are (Adichie, 2012).

Following Adichie’s idea, gender “had prescribed” that women had no interest in telling the Biafra war, that women perceived the conflict differently from men. Adichie and Okparanta, through their novels, want to prove the opposite. Even if, as Adichie has pointed out, “men and women experience the world differently” because “gender matters”, this does not mean that they are not equally interested in telling the world. Of course, this perspective is also reflected in their memory of the Biafra war. The main characters of their novels are women: women capable of separating themselves from their children to protect them, women capable of loving freely, women capable of trading behind enemy lines in order to get food. This is the reason why I decided to use the female perspective as a new “perspective” compared to the male one in analysing how Adichie and Okparanta have told the Biafra war. Moreover, given the long history of exclusion of women in Biafran narratives, a female

approach is also inserted in a perspective from below which constitutes another *file rouge* of my analysis.

2.5 Plot and main narrative features in *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Under the Udala Trees*

Half of a Yellow Sun, set in Nigeria during the years of the civil war, tells the impact of the Biafra war on the lives of the two twins Olanna and Kainene, Odenigbo, an idealistic university professor, Richard, an Englishman arrived in Africa to write a novel, and Ugwu, a young houseboy. Before the declaration of the secession of Biafra, the characters' lives take place between academic meetings, loves and business. Odenigbo, a university professor in the city of Nsukka, organizes weekly meetings with other intellectuals, during which they discuss the most varied questions related to Africa after the end of colonialism. Ugwu, a young country boy who works as a houseboy in the house of Odenigbo, implicitly takes part in these debates. Olanna, Odenigbo's lover, enjoys the circle after moving to Odenigbo's place and renouncing the richness of her family. Conversely, Kainene supervises her family's activities and business, and she begins a relationship with Richard, an Englishman interested in African art. In this way, Adichie builds a narrative made up of ordinary people.

When the war breaks out, their lives change drastically. Olanna, Odenigbo, their child (fruit of Odenigbo's betrayal with another woman), and Ugwu are forced to flee Nsukka in order to reach Umuahia, where they live and experience the war's horrors and the poverty's difficulties. Later they move to Kainene's and Richard's place, where Kainene manages a refugee camp. There is no food, no medicines, there is nothing: the war has wiped out everything. To cope with this dramatic situation, Kainene decides to trade across the enemy lines. However, she will never come back. In the end of the book, Adichie does not explicitly say whether Kainene died or is still alive, leaving the reader in a state of suspension.

Focusing on *Half of a Yellow Sun*'s main narrative features, two elements are needed to be discussed. Firstly, the novel is organized into four sections that alternate two time frames, the early sixties and the late sixties, creating temporal leaps between past and present. Secondly, the book contains another book, *The World Was Silent When We Died*, written by Ugwu, which contains comments and references to the war. Ojinmah argues that this book represents "Adichie's real voice" who has chosen to entrust her thoughts to this ordinary character (Ojinmah, 2012: 10). For example, through Ugwu, Adichie expresses harsh words against the indifference of the world in front of the Biafran humanitarian crisis:

He writes about the world that remained silent while Biafrans died. He argues that Britain inspired this silence. The arms and advice that Britain gave Nigeria shaped other countries. In the United States, Biafra was ‘under Britain’s sphere of interest’. In Canada, the prime minister quipped. ‘Where is Biafra?’ The Soviet Union sent technicians and planes to Nigeria, thrilled at the chance to influence Africa without offending America and Britain [...] Communist China denounced the Anglo-American-Soviet imperialism but did little else to support Biafra (Adichie, 2017: 258).

In this way, the novel offers the reader a triple perspective: that of Olanna, that of Adichie and that of Ugwu who, even if “hunger was stealing the memories”, does not want to forget what happened using writing as a strategy to keep memory alive (Adichie, 389: 2017).

Under the Udala Trees, set during the second year of the civil war, tells the story of an 11-year-old girl called Ijeoma. Because of the war and unable to cope with famine, Adaora, her mother, sends her away from Ojoto to Nnewi. Here, Ijeoma becomes a housemaid for a grammar school teacher and his wife who were friends to her father before he died during the war. Alone in Nnewi, Ijeoma falls in love with Amina, a Muslim Hausa orphan. But, when their relationship is discovered, Ijeoma is sent back to her mother who, through the Bible, is determined to teach Ijeoma that love between two girls is impossible and sinful. However, Ijeoma’s impulses are too strong: she begins to question her mother's words and she falls in love with a female local teacher, Ndidi. But, because of a surprise attack during a lesbian meeting, she stops her homosexual relationship and she decides to marry a childhood friend, Chibundu. They have a child, but their happiness is only apparent. Ijeoma understands that she cannot deny her identity anymore. She abandons her husband and she starts a new life with Ndidi and her daughter.

As it is evident from the plot, *Under the Udala Trees* does not only deal with the Biafra war, but also with Nigerian gay communities’ difficulties. In the “Author’s Note”, Chinelo Okparanta clearly expresses her point of view, arguing “this novel attempts to give Nigeria’s marginalized LGBTQ citizens a more powerful voice, and a place in our nation’s history” (Okparanta, 2017: 325). Enjeti has underlined that

Okparanta deftly negotiates a balance between a love story and a war story, each of which threatens to eclipse the other. Though it has to work on many levels at once, *Udala Trees* delivers a delicate study of the competing forces that pull at Ijeoma: her gay identity, the defeat of independent Biafra, the taboo of Igbo and Hausa relationships (Enjeti, 2015)

The themes of war and of homophobia meet, and the abomination of a relationship between two

women is further exacerbated by the abomination of a relationship between people belonging to different ethnic groups, Igbo and Hausa. In fact, the Biafra war is always present and its memory becomes an instrument to justify the characters' present, even when the war is over. If it were not for the war, would Ijeoma ever have met Amina? If it were not for the war, would Ijeoma have discovered her homosexuality? (Okparanta, 2017: 4-5). These are the questions that Ijeoma raises through continuous temporal jumps between past and present.

Chapter 3: War memory of the fictional characters

3.1 War memory

This chapter deals with the first level of analysis of the Biafra memory, the memory of the fictional characters and it follows Halbwachs's theory, according to which memory is characterized by two levels: an individual memory and a collective memory (Halbwachs, 1992:40). In this scenario of constant intersection of individual memory and collective memory, the narratives of the selected novels will be placed. Both Adichie and Okparanta focus on the personal memories of each character, underling the existence of individual experiences of war which are not comparable to the others' ones. At the same time, however, they converge characters' individual memories into a larger collective memory, which in their novels refer to that of a specific group, the Igbo one.

3.1.1 The individual level

Half of a Yellow Sun and *Under the Udala Trees* are both characterized by the presence of images and scenes that remind the reader of the atrocities and the suffering caused by the civil war. The conflict continues to have an impact on the characters' lives, both during the war and when the war was over. During the Biafran war, characters face death, hunger, pain and suffering. Even at the end of the conflict fears and memories linked to it return, forcing the characters to reflect upon what has happened. In both novels, it is possible to find detailed descriptions of the war, such as the one of a massacre, alongside with memories of those terrible years recollecting traumatic events. Memory images that emerge in the minds of the characters through activation processes are triggered by the vision of other scenes of death and suffering, or by apparently harmless objects.

In any case, these memories arise from the personal experiences of each character, subsequently they are placed on an individual level of reconstruction of memory. This means that everyone can remember, but each memory is different from others "given the variety of temperaments and life circumstances" (Halwbach, 1992: 54). In fact, every character has lived the war in a different way and he\she has developed personal and individual memories connected to his/her own experience. In this sense, the recollection of war memories does not take place through the perspective of a common past, but as an event that has affected every person in a unique way that cannot be universalized to others. The way in which these individual memories emerge is extremely varied: the vision of a dead body, a voice, a gesture etc... As the following examples will show characters' individual memories arise from situations in the present. The traumas of war are always linked to something observed in

the present, because memories “are subjective, highly selective reconstructions, dependent on the situation in which they are recalled” (Erl, 2011, 8).

In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Adichie offers the reader intense images, exasperated by a raw and rude language. They can emerge in daily conversations about brutal methods used by governmental forces against the rebels, about rape and violence that have become a routine with the outbreak of the war. For example, an old man loses his patience and his anger explodes violently when he says: “they are even looting toilet seats! Toilet seats! [...] And they choose the best houses and force wives and daughters to spread their legs for them and cook for them” (Adichie, 2017: 285). Equally strong are the scenes in which Olanna discovers her neighbour cooking her dog to prepare a soup (Adichie, 2017: 342), or still the one in which Adichie describes the devastating effects of kwashiorkor’s syndrome on children:

A mother was sitting on the floor with two children lying next to her. Olanna could not tell how old they were. They were naked; the taut globes that were their bellies would not fit in a shirt anyway. Their buttocks and chests were collapsed into folds of rumpled skin. On their head, spurt of reddish hair. Olanna’s eyes met their mother’s steady stare and Olanna looked away quickly. She slapped a fly away from her face and thought how healthy all the flies looked, how alive, how vibrant (Adichie, 2017: 348).

The scenes above describe how each character has experienced the war and its effects in a personal way. Thus, given these individual experiences, characters have also created individual memories of the war.

After having witnessed the horrendous murder of her aunt, her uncle and her pregnant cousin, barbarously killed by governmental forces, Olanna starts to be haunted by painful nightmares. She is haunted by horrendous images of their dead bodies, and suffers a trauma that immobilizes her in bed for many days. Odenigbo, Ugwu and friends are shocked and, even if they respect Olanna's pain, they struggle to understand how the memory of that massacre can prevent Olanna from walking. However, they are not Olanna, and she is the only one who can remember and relive the memory of the massacre. Everything reminds her of the horror of that scene, even apparently insignificant gestures as, for example, when Odenigbo raises an arm and “Olanna thought how awkwardly twisted Aunt Ifeka’s arm had looked, as she lay on the ground, how her blood had pooled so thick that it looked like glue, not red but close to black” (Adichie, 2017: 163). The killing of her relatives is part of a collective event of the war, but it evokes an individual and a personal memory that belongs to Olanna. The raising of Odenigbo's arm is a harmless gesture, but not for Olanna who sees in that movement a trace of a personal trauma.

Another scene linked to the creation of individual memories occur when Kainene, after seeing a skinny soldier, asks Olanna if she continues to dream of the girl's head in the calabash.¹³ Olanna lies to Kainene, telling her she is not able to remember dreams, even if in her mind the memory of that scene is alive and indelible. Olanna knows that the calabash woman will never go away, but she is not able to share and to alleviate this personal memory with her sister. This act of remembering is situated on an individual level, in which Olanna is the only one capable of recollecting what she had seen, given that the calabash woman is linked to a personal experience. Even the dear ones can be excluded, and it is demonstrated by Olanna's inability to share the pain of that memory with Kainene.

Individual memories can also be activated by your own image reflected in a mirror. In one scene, returning from the airport where he witnessed a massacre, Richard is shocked to see that his face has not changed after what he had seen. Likewise, in this case, Richard's memory is determined by something observed in the present:

He turned the tap on. It shocked him, how unchanged he looked in the mirror, how the air of his eyebrows still stuck out unrestrained and his eyes were still the same stained-glass blue. He should have been transfigured by what he had seen. His shame should have left red warts on his face. [...] He stared at himself and wondered if it really had happened, if he really had seen men die, if the lingering smells from shattered liquor bottles and bloodied human bodies were only in his imagination (Adichie, 2017: 154-155).

These examples confirm how memories always spring from personal experiences that have left an indelible mark on the soul of the characters and have challenged their integrity. Moreover, these individual memories always derive from present situations, as the sight of a skinny soldier, a raised arm or a mirrored image. Erll stresses this past/present connection, arguing that “from the abundance of impressions, dates, or facts, only few elements can be selected to be encoded and remembered”, because “in this way, that which is important (for the present) is distinguished from that which seems insignificant” (Erll, 2011: 147). Jan Assmann shares the same opinion, arguing that “memory works by reconstructing, that is, it always relates its knowledge to an actual and contemporary situation” (Assmann, 2001: 130).

The examples above-mentioned clearly express the relevance of the present in the recollection of memory. The characters' remembering is not just a tribute to the past, but it arises from present difficulties, such as Olanna's nightmares, Kainene's sight of a soldier, Richard's terror in seeing his

¹³ Kainene is referring to a story that Olanna told her about a woman with a calabash in which she was carrying the head of her dead daughter (Adichie, 2017: 149).

own distorted image in the mirror. Above all, the characters' remembering springs from moments whose value and intensity vary according to the personal experiences of each character. Richard was not the only one witnessing the massacre at the airport, but then again, the individual memory of that event and its elaboration are manifested in him according to dynamics not equal to other people. In this sense, his memory is individual, personal and particular, because its elaboration is individual, personal and particular.

In *Under the Udala Trees*, Okparanta also describes strong and tragic moments determined by the war. One of the most brutal parts of the novel is when Ijeoma's father refuses to go to the bunker during the bombs, and he is killed. Ijeoma and her mother find his body and Okparanta describes, in a very detailed way, the horrible scene:

We found him face-down on the black-and-white-tiled floor of the dining room. Mama leapt to him, bent over his body, resumed calling out his name. His hands were tangled strangely around his body, dying branches twisted around a dying trunk. Pieces of wood from the dining table lay scattered around him. A purple-brown hue had formed where the pool of his blood was collecting (Okparanta, 2017: 19).

However, the images of the death of Ijeoma's father is not limited to that tragic moment, it continues to affect her life even after a long time. The memory of what happened will persecute Ijeoma throughout the whole novel, and even in this case, the activation of that memory lies on an individual level, which is the result of mechanisms that belong to Ijeoma's personal experiences. A voice or a newspaper although harmless things for many, are not silent for Ijeoma's soul:

I resigned myself to just thinking of him. But the way I thought of him, it was the way a starving child thinks about food: he was always on my mind. Each time I heard a man's voice, or each time I saw anyone reading a newspaper, I thought of him. Mama never turned on the radio-gramophone. It was as if she had made it a point not to turn it on. But she didn't need to. Just seeing it was enough of a trigger for me to think of Papa (Okparanta, 2017: 25).

Even the sight of children affected by kwashiorkor's syndrome reminds her of what happened. Their swollen bellies, their thinness and their faces are terrifying and "if someone were to have snapped their picture, it could have been another one of Papa's newspaper front pages" (Okparanta, 2017: 30). The sight of other dead bodies also contributes to haunt her:

Corpses flanked the roads. Decapitated bodies. Bodies with missing limbs. All around was the persistent smell of decaying flesh. Even if I was no stranger to these sights and smells, Papa's case being the foremost in my mind, still I felt a lurching in my stomach. [...] More corpses, more soldiers marching, more chanting, all of the typical sights and sounds of a nation at war (Okparanta, 2017: 48-49).

Ijeoma's mother also witnessed the killing of her husband, but her acts of remembering or forgetting, as I will address later, are different from those of her daughter's. Therefore, her father's death represents not only a moment of individual tragedy, but above all its memory arises from feelings and personal sensations that belong to Ijeoma alone.

Individual memories derive from less brutal but equally significant moments as well. During a breakfast, Ijeoma, looking at her dish, realizes how much scant it is compared to what she used to eat before the war. Looking at her breakfast, Ijeoma realizes that "it had been some time since we'd had any bread or tea or Kellogg's cornflakes, or Peak milk or Carnation evaporated milk" (Okparanta, 2017: 22). Another example is the description of the arrival of an *onye ocha* minister¹⁴ at Ijeoma's school. His presence reminds her of the war years when the villagers of Ojoto believed that the Red Cross *ndi ocha* workers¹⁵ had been sent by God and could even bring the dead back to life. Even if the war is over, Ijeoma cannot avoid being haunted by its memories, and "the idea of an *onye ocha* minister" reminds her "of what the villagers had been saying during the war" (Okparanta, 2017: 160). These examples confirm the way in which the past invades the present of the characters, and how the selection, the recollection and the elaboration of memories are determined by present situations, such as a breakfast or an *onye ocha* minister's visit. Above all, these examples confirm how the selection and the recollection of memories arise from the personal experiences of each character. If for some people a miserable breakfast or a minister's visit could pass as unnoticed, for Ijeoma they bring to light a happy past that is no longer there.

Another interesting example, closer to the reflected image of Richard in the mirror, occurs when observing her mother, Ijeoma realizes how much she has changed, especially how much weight she has lost. The effects of the war on people's bodies are clear signs of its devastation, and Ijeoma, looking at her mother, cannot avoid observing "the way her clothes draped over her body with no discernible shape, the way she smelled of stale sweat, not terribly unfamiliar, but a little off-putting" (Okparanta, 2017: 126). Consequently, Ijeoma's shock is the result of a personal and intimate memory linked to her mother's image before the war.

¹⁴ A person capable of doing miracles through prayers.

¹⁵ With this term Okparanta refers to the way in which the villagers referred to Red Cross' medical staff.

Finally, when Ijeoma starts a relationship with Ndidi, she attends a church in which groups of homosexuals meet secretly. During one of the many meetings, Ijeoma, Ndidi and other girls suffer a surprise attack from a homophobic group. Most of the girls manage to save themselves through hiding in a bunker. In the darkness of those moments of fear, Ijeoma remembers “the way we used to do those days during the war”, and she realizes how little is the difference between the bunker in which she is now hiding and those bunkers in which she took refuge during the war air raids (Okparanta, 2017: 207). This example represents the peak of how present situations determine the recollection of past and individual memories. The bunker reminds to Ijeoma the same bunkers of the war.

Recalling the words of Erll, “from the abundance of impressions, dates, or facts” (Erll, 2011: 147) Ijeoma selects a specific moment of her past in a way that gives sense to a present situation through the recollection of a memory, which belongs to her personal experience of the war. These examples are inevitably connected to the narrative strategies of the authors and to their desire not to disregard the Biafra war as if it were a mathematical formula of deaths and suffering. Giving special attention to the individual memories of the characters, Adichie and Okparanta wanted to transform the war from a historical fact into a human experience. What matters in their novels is not only historical events, but how they are metabolized by characters and what meaning these events have for them. There is an evident shift in perspective: from the general to the particular.

3.1.2 The collective level

In so far as memory contributes to the construction of our identity, both on an individual and a collective level, these two levels cannot be considered independently. Rather, they are in a reciprocal relationship of influence because the recollection of the individual is influenced by the values and beliefs of the larger community (or group) to which he/she belongs. A group to which the individual in turns belong and contributes to build. Halwbach suggests that “each impression and each fact, even if it apparently concerns a particular person exclusively, leaves a lasting memory only to the extent [...] that it is connected with the thoughts that come to us from the social milieu (Halwbach, 1992: 53). Therefore, individual memories, even if they are personal and unique, depend on the memory of a group.

Both in *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Under the Udala Trees* the group which emerges with greater attention is the Igbo one. Surely, the prevalence of an Igbo perspective must have been influenced by the fact that both writers are Igbo, and therefore of special interest for them to reconstruct the past of their specific ethnic group. For example, in the “Author’s note”, Adichie wrote:

I salute my Uncle Mai, Michael E. N. Adichie, who was wounded while fighting with the 21st Battalion of the Biafran Army, and who spoke to me of his experience with much grace and humor. I salute, also, the sparkling memories of my Uncle CY [...] who fought with the Biafran Commandos, my cousin Pauly [...] who shared his memories of life in Biafra as a thirteen-year-old, and my friend Okla [...] who will not clutch this under his arm as he did the last (Adichie, 2017: 435).

Going back to the woman with the calabash (described in 3.1.1), Françoise Ugochukwu has argued that the woman has opened the cover of the calabash to show her dead daughter's head to other travellers. Just as that woman has unveiled her personal drama to travellers, in the same way Adichie "opens her novel to readers and invites them to see, to know and understand" her family history (Ugochukwu, 2010: 64). Adichie's and Okparanta's novels are clear examples of an "intergenerational memory" which, according to Erll, occurs when "an exchange of living memory takes place between eye-witnesses and descendants" (Erlls, 2011: 17). However, the writers' desire to transmit the memory of their ancestors does not mean that Adichie and Okparanta wanted to depict only their ethnic group as a victim of the war. Their choice is more the result of a concrete necessity, that is, to give a meaning to individual memories through their conversion into a collective memory. Moreover, focusing on a specific group, Adichie and Okparanta offer the reader a more restricted scenario, in which it is easier to observe details, which risk disappearing in a more general and larger context.

How does the recollection of a collective memory occur in a novel? According to Erll, in a literary text the creation of a common past could be constructed by "an antagonistic mode", which "represents identity-groups and their version of the past" in order to narrow the reconstruction of the past itself (Erll, 2011: 159). One version of the past could be, for example, that of a specific group, in this case the Igbo one. In my analysis, following Erll's model, I have identified four narrative strategies that I have named: intolerance towards Igbo people; Igbo's disdain towards other ethnic groups; denial of Igbo identity by Igbo people; prohibition of unions and marriages between different ethnic groups.

In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, a clear example of the first strategy is expressed through Susan's racism¹⁶ against Igbo people during a conversation with Richard. Her words are a clear proof of old prejudices, such as an Igbo-Jewish association, that are difficult to dismantle:

¹⁶ Susan is Richard's lover before he met Kainene.

There are lots of Igbo people here, well they are everywhere really, aren't they? Not that they didn't have it coming to them, when you think about it, with their being so clannish and uppity and controlling the markets. Very Jewish really. And to think they are relatively uncivilized; one couldn't compare them to the Yoruba, for example, who have had contact with Europeans on the coast for years. I remember somebody telling me when I first came to be careful about hiring an Igbo houseboy because, before I knew it, he would own my house and the land it was built on (Adichie, 2017: 154).

Another scene of intolerance towards Igbo people occurs when Olanna visits her uncle, and she witnesses a conversation about the fact that schools in the North do not admit Igbo students. Olanna vividly remembers the fury of her uncle and his determination to build Igbo schools. Through Susan's speech, Igbo are presented as uncivilized, while in the scene of Olanna's uncle the intolerance against them emerges from other ethnic groups' old prejudices. In any case, the contempt towards Igbo paradoxically contributes to strengthen and confirm their identity as a group, because the fear of being oppressed incites in them a desire for revenge.

The second narrative strategy is that of Igbo's contempt and prejudices towards other ethnic groups. They are not only presented as the hated ones, but also as those who hate, offering to the reader a more impartial and a more complex view. For example, in chapter 26 of *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Ugwu has now been enrolled as a child soldier by the Biafran forces. A man, seeing these young soldiers fighting, exclaims vigorously: "these boys are wonderful! Just give them arms and they will send the vandals back" (Adichie, 2017: 290). If the Igbo are often called thieves, delinquents and manipulators by Hausa and Yoruba, in the same way they define their enemies as "vandals". Something similar also happens in *Under the Udala Trees* when, after listening to Gowon's speech on the radio announcing the definitive defeat of Biafra, the grammar school teacher and his wife cannot hold back their resentment defining Gowon an "imbecile" and a "murder" (Okparanta, 2017: 116). Another example is when Amina arrives at the grammar school teacher's house and Ijeoma notices great ferment about the presence of a Hausa girl in their home. Ijeoma perfectly knows that "chances were that had Amina been an Igbo girl, or even from Cross Rive State", or at least if Amina "had been Yoruba". But, Amina is Hausa, and therefore "an enemy of the Igbo people" (Okparanta, 2017: 108). It is not surprising that Ijeoma's mother gets angry with the grammar school teacher, when she finds out that he allowed her daughter to live in the same house with a Hausa girl, forgetting "how dangerous it was", and that "it was the Hausa army that had killed her husband, the very same Hausa people who had destroyed Biafra" (Okparanta, 2017: 128). Of course, in defining a child as an enemy Okparanta expresses her veiled irony and it constitutes a narrative strategy to affirm the opposite and the absurdity of that statement.

The third strategy of focusing on an Igbo perspective is expressed by the denial of Igbo identity by Igbo people. A clear example of this is found in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Olanna is in the market with her cousin and witnesses two men who are beating another man, because he is Igbo. Olanna, however, does not have the courage to intervene, and she manages to escape with the help of her cousin who starts talking in Yoruba in order to convince the people around them that they are not Igbo. After the incident, Olanna reflects on what has happened, and she feels ashamed of herself. Above all, “she could not believe how easy it had been to deny who they were, to shrug off being Igbo” (Adichie, 2017: 133). A similar scene is repeated in the course of the novel, but this time Olanna is determined to act differently. On a plane on her way back to Nsukka, Olanna meets a man who, not knowing that Olanna is Igbo, reveals his bother towards Igbo people, arguing that

the 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, 2017: 227).

This time Olanna cannot be silent and through a linguistic stratagem, she exclaims: ““we say *kedu*, not *keda*’ [...] It means *How are you*””. The man is upset and he asks her if she is Igbo. Olanna pronounces a staunch “yes”; even when the man, still shocked, says “but you have the face of Fulani people”, Olanna reconfirms her identity, shaking her head and replying with conviction “Igbo” (Adichie, 2017: 227). The two examples mentioned above demonstrate how the weight of a collective belonging can affect people, pushing them to deny their identity in a dangerous situation. However, on the flight, Olanna, mindful of what had happened in the market, decides to act differently. Obviously, the present context in which the two scenes take place is completely different. In the market, Olanna is in a dangerous situation, while in the airplane being Igbo is easier.

Finally, Igbo identity-group and its memory is emphasized in the novels by the prohibition of unions and marriages between different ethnic groups. Before meeting Odenigbo, Olanna was engaged to a Hausa boy named Mohammed. Mohammed's mother had always been frightened by the idea that her son could marry an Igbo girl. Nevertheless, when the relationship between Olanna and Mohammed ends, the woman suddenly becomes friendly and sweet because, as Olanna pointed out, ““I am no longer the Igbo woman you wanted to marry who would taint the lineage with infidel blood”” (Adichie, 2017: 46). Something similar happens in *Under the Udala Trees* when Amina is getting married with a Hausa boy. Ijeoma’s mother expresses her satisfaction about a marriage into her own tribe, saying: “you’ll be with your own kind, back where you belong, learn a little about your people. Keep to yourselves” (Okparanta, 2017: 170). In both cases, mothers' attitudes underline fear

of contaminating the purity of a group. In particular, Ijeoma's appeal to go "back where you belong" clearly underlines the need of referring to a common past, made of traditions and beliefs in which to recognize oneself.

Other scenes are clearly inserted in the perspective of Biafra memory. When Ijeoma's mother discovers her daughter's homosexual relationship with Amina, she is shocked not only by the discovery that her daughter is a lesbian, but also by the fact that her daughter has undertaken a relationship with the enemy. Her words are eloquent:

You're Igbo. That girl is Hausa. Even if she were able to be a boy, don't you see that Igbo and Hausa would mean the mingling of seeds? Don't you see? It would be against God's statutes' [...] Besides, are you forgetting what they did to us during the war? Have you forgotten what they did to Biafra? Have you forgotten that it was her people who killed your father? (Okparanta, 2017:76).

On a narrative level, homosexuality is momentarily forgotten, and the war old grudges re-emerge alongside religious beliefs resulting from personal interpretations of the Bible. The memory of what happened during the war cannot be insulted by relationships with people belonging to other ethnic groups. Igbo/Igbo unions is the only possible way, and loving bans are indispensable to preserve Igbo people's memory.

The peak of an Igbo perspective is expressed in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. In one of the many academic meetings that Odenigbo used to organize at his place in Nsukka before the outbreak of the war, there is a discussion about identity issues. Odenigbo makes a speech about identity and he affirms that the only true African identity is the tribe, arguing that: "I am Nigerian because a white man created Nigeria and gave me that identity. I am black because the white man constructed *black* to be as a different as possible from his *white*. But I was Igbo before the white man came" (Adichie, 2017: 20). Odenigbo's Nigerian identity is despised because it is part of a group in which Odenigbo does not recognize himself, a group created by white men. Therefore, in order to build a collective memory, it is not enough to be part of a group, but it is also indispensable to recognize oneself in that group and in its memory.

Therefore, the four strategies underline a common feature in the selected novels, which is the greater visibility for the Igbo group and its collective memory. However, this does not mean that Igbo are presented as the only victims of the conflict. The "antagonistic mode" described by Erll should not be interpreted as an attempt by Adichie and Okparanta to create a privileged version of a group. It is more a narrative strategy whose purpose is the analysis of individual memories as always inserted in a social framework. In fact, there is always an interplay between individual memories and their

collective dimension, in this case the Igbo one. Moreover, the four strategies above are also inserted in a communicative dimension. These strategies can be considered as narrative perspectives through which Adichie and Okparanta become part of their novels as “narrative characters”. In fact, the Igbo story also belongs to them. Adichie and Okparanta are themselves Igbo, and therefore they participate, implicitly as Igbo writers, in recollecting the past of their ethnic group.

3.2 Strategies of remembering and forgetting

There are two ways in understanding memory on an individual and on a collective level. Firstly, in the previous analysis about the individual and collective level, memory could be interpreted as an expression of the contents of remembered experiences. Secondly, memory can also be understood as the ability to recollect traces of those experiences in the moment we recall them. Memory, therefore, does not only refer to the contents of memory itself, but it also refers to strategies and mechanisms we use to recall the past, both on an individual and a collective level (“Memory”, 2018). However, in this perspective a clarification is needed. Along with strategies of remembering, strategies to erase memories can also be found, for example, because of the desire to delete the traumas of the war.

Both in *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Under the Udala Trees*, these two kinds of strategies emerge. The main characters in fact are forced to face the concrete difficulties of the civil war, but also to face the memories connected to it. In more or less similar ways, almost all of them assume a double attitude towards war memories: on the one hand, they want to remember what happened to persevere the memory; on the other hand, the horrors and sufferings seen are so heavy that they push them to erase and remove those memories. They, therefore, activate simultaneously strategies of remembering and strategies of forgetting.

3.2.1 Strategies of remembering

In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, one of the main characters through which it is possible to observe an act of remembering is Richard. After witnessing a massacre of Igbo people at the airport, he decides to visit Nnaemeka’s parents, a young man who worked as a policeman in the airport with whom Richard had had a chat waiting for the flight, before he was brutally shot by government forces in a surprise attack. Following the massacre, Richard feels the need to recollect that moment. To do that, he decides to visit the boy's parents and to tell them about the last moments of their son's life. Hence, telling the story becomes his personal strategy to remember what had happened. However, finding the right words is not easy, and Richard wondered “whether they would prefer to hear their son had remained

stoic in the face of death or if they would want to hear that he fought it, that he charged towards the gun” (Adichie, 2017: 164). Richard's memory is inserted in an individual level, however, after sharing it with Nnaemeka's parents it is transferred onto a collective level. Now that memory does not belong only to him: it belongs to a group that is united by death. The exchange between the individual and collective level is achieved through Richard's sharing of the memory with Nnaemeka's parents.

Despite the visit to Naemeka's parents, Richard realizes that it was not enough to calm his soul. Richard is haunted by the horrible images he saw at the airport, and he wants to forget them and erase their memory. On several occasions

he had often wished that he would have lost his mind, or that his memory would suppress itself, but instead everything took on a terrible transparency and he had only to close his eyes to see the freshly dead bodies on the floor of the airport and to recall the pitch of the screams. His mind remained lucid (Adichie, 2017: 165).

Realizing that he had failed to metabolize Nnaemeka's death, Richard decides to face that moment and to recollect its memories through writing. He starts writing down what happened in order not to lose the memory and, at the same time, to cope with it. However, also in this case, he realizes how difficult it is to put those memories on a piece of paper, and he doubts of being able to do it. He realizes that "the echo of unreality weighted each world down; he clearly remembered what had happened at that airport, but to write about it he would have to reimagine it, and he was not sure if he could” (Adichie, 2017: 168). Despite the difficulties, a transition takes place in Richard from telling to writing. Writing becomes a more powerful strategy of remembering, though, only on an individual level, as initially these primordial writings remain part of Richard's private life.

The transition to a collective level of reconstruction and construction of memory occurs when General Madu¹⁷ asks Richard to work as a journalist for the Biafran forces. Madu asks him to write "stories that are more than just the number of Biafran dead", because "the world has to know the truth of what is happening, because they simply cannot remain silent while we died" (Adichie, 2017: 304-305). Initially, Richard does not want to accept the assignment, however two things make him change his mind. Firstly, Madu's phrase, "they simply cannot remain silent while we died" resonates in his head and strikes him deeply. Secondly, Madu turns to him not as a white man who has no right to tell a story that does not belong to him. Instead, Madu turns to him as an "insider", and in this way Richard becomes part of the Igbo group. Richards change of mind recalls Halbwachs's concept, according to which: when an individual becomes part of a group, his individual memories also become part of a

¹⁷ Madu is a Kainene's old friend who works as general for the Biafran army.

collective memory (Halbwachs from Erll, 2011: 16) Richard is now part of the Biafran group and this membership gives him the right to recollect its collective memory. Moreover, Adichie's concept of the danger of a single story emerges strongly through Madu's openness to Richard: there is not a single version of the facts and, among the many versions, Richard's one enjoys full authority, even if he is not a Biafran.

However, at the end of the novel, things change drastically. Ugwu asks Richard if he is still writing according to Madu's proposal. Richard tells him he has abandoned the project and he confesses to Ugwu the impossibility of writing because "the war isn't my story to tell, really" (Adichie, 2017: 425). The assignment of a membership from Madu is not enough to make Richard feel part of that group and, leaving the group, he loses the possibility to recollect its memory through the writing strategy. Ugwu decides to take Richard's project in his own hands and write the book Richard could never write. Through the presence of Ugwu's book "The World Was Silent When We Died", Adichie makes the construction of Biafran memory observable. As Erll pointed out, "memory itself is, however not observable. Only through the observation of concrete acts of remembering [...] we can hypothesize about memory's nature and functioning" (Erll, 2011: 8). Ugwu's book functions as an act of remembering, it tells us about "memory's nature and functioning". Through this book the reader is informed not only of memory's content, but also how memory is told and articulated. This is the reason why Emmanuel Mzomera Ngiwira has rightly defined *Half of a Yellow Sun* as "highly metafictional" because of Adichie's choice to give the reader not only the opportunity to discover Biafra's memory, but also to observe the act of transforming its memory into narrative through Ugwu's book (Ngiwira, 2014: 46).

As we saw with Richard, Ugwu begins to write for two reasons. First of all, writing is a strategy to remember what happened; but writing is also a strategy to treat the wounds of his soul, after the terrible experience as a child soldier. During his enlistment, Ugwu has done terrible things, such as killing people or raping a girl. Ugwu feels ashamed of what he has done and he feels the necessity to expiate his crimes and his sense of guilt. Therefore, "the act of writing becomes part of the process of healing, expiation and dealing" (Ouma, 2011: 24), and through writing Ugwu faces his present, in a perennial tension and connection between present and past. In fact, we cannot forget that Richard and Ugwu begin to write when time has turned their experiences into memories.

Strategies of remembering can also be found in *Under the Udala Trees*, especially through the character of Ijeoma. Differently from her mother, who throws old clothes away as a strategy to throw away old memories, Ijeoma manifests an attachment to these things of daily life. During the first night at the grammar school teacher's home she wears her old nightgown because it reminded her "of

Mama, and of Papa, and of Ojoto, and of peace and calm, and of our lives before the war” (Okparanta, 2017: 55).

Along with objects, dreams are another strategy of remembering. Even when Ijeoma is an adult and she has left Chibundu to stay with Ndidi, she continues to dream about Amina. In one dream, Ijeoma talks to Amina asking her: “Do you remember? This is where we walked. This is where we worked. This is where we grew” This is where we laughed. This is where we made love. This is where I learned love” (Okparanta, 2017: 316). Halwbach expresses a sceptical view on dreams as possible sites of memory. Given that a dream “is based only upon itself” and it is dislocated from a collective dimension, Halwbach defines dreams not as a true memory, but as “fragments of memory” (Halwbach, 1992: 42). This is the reason why I preferred to consider dreams as a strategy of remembering, and not as contents of memory.

Ijeoma also uses writing as a strategy of remembering. During the years of marriage with Chibundu, she begins to write letters to Ndidi, in which she relives the moments spent with her before things changed. As for Ugwu, letters become a cure and an emotional therapy, because “better to get out the things on my mind than to allow them to fester and grow mold and cause my insides to feel rotten. Better to get them out before they became the worst kind of wound” (Okparanta, 2017: 254). Through writing, Ijeoma copes with her difficult present and, as we have already seen with Richard and Ugwu, Ijeoma also begins to write when time has turned her experiences into memories.

Finally, in the last pages of the novel, Okparanta reports a speech by Gowon who announces the end of the war and the future national unity. After listening to his words, Ijeoma understands that the best strategy to preserve the memory of war and to overcome its trauma and suffering is to forgive the war itself:

But remember the war and its atrocities, and remember the speech, and remember that aspect of national reconciliation, and of the building of a new nation. Forgive Gowon. Forgive Ojukwu. And forgive the war (Okparanta, 2017: 316).

3.2.2 Strategies of forgetting

Along with strategies of remembering, the narratives of the selected novels also contain strategies of forgetting. Some memories can be too difficult to be preserved, and characters try to delete and wipe them away, as if nothing had happened. In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, faced with the umpteenth tale of death and horror, Ugwu can no longer bear the weight of what he hears. He stops listening to the voices around him, hoping “the radio announcers to be silent too” (Adichie, 2017: 144). When he

goes to the railway station bringing food to the refugees, Ugwu meets a man devastated by a hideous wound on his head, and Ugwu wishes “not remember this man tomorrow because he would not want to” (Adichie, 2017: 145). A similar scene occurs when Ugwu is enlisted as a child soldier. In the desperation of those moments, other child soldiers try to relieve suffering by telling their stories and sharing their past. However, Ugwu “did not want to know their stories”, because “it was better to leave each man’s load unopened, undisturbed, in his own mind” (Adichie, 2017: 361). This example is particularly interesting because it demonstrates how the interplay between individual memory and collective memory can be determined not only by processes of memory construction, but also by processes of memory denial. Through sharing personal memories Ugwu’s friends collectivize them. Ugwu rejects this attempt of collectivization as a strategy to drive pain out.

Another scene occurs when Olanna preserves and simultaneously destroys her memory. Fearing that soldiers could find Biafran pounds and accuse them of being traitors, Olanna decides to burn them. Odenigbo observes the scene and expresses his disapproval by saying that in this way Olanna is burning their memory. Olanna does not want to entrust her memory to objects that anyone could steal or take away anymore. She wants her mind and body to become custodians of her memory, and she replies to Odenigbo: “my memory is inside me” (Adichie, 2017: 432). In this way, the tension between memory and loss of memory is resolved through the act of destroying a memory of a past event to strengthen it. However, the key character of the scene is not Olanna, but Odenigbo. As we have seen so far, strategies of forgetting on an individual level can be mainly interpreted as human survival techniques. On the other hand, on a collective level the forgetting can be more harmful, because it means deleting memories that belong to a group, and not to a single person. Olanna is not just destroying an object of her individual memory, but she is destroying pounds that are the symbol of the collective memory of a group, that of the Biafrans.

In *Under the Udala Trees*, Ijeoma’s mother represents one of the most concrete examples through which strategies of forgetting can be observed. The death of her husband has negatively marked the woman and she understands that she must do something to delete those bad memories that are making her life impossible. She decided to leave her old house and move to her home village Aba. Ijeoma’s mother is sure that after moving to another place her nightmares will disappear and that Aba can become the symbol of “a new life with new memories to be made” (Okparanta, 2017: 69). However, she soon realizes that escaping from Ojoto was not enough, and war memories torment her in Aba too. After seeing a dead man near the entrance of his bungalow in Aba, she finally realizes that “Aba was no better than Ojoto” and that it reminds her of “vision of death”, but especially “memories of death” (Okparanta, 2017: 62). Another scene occurs in the first pages of the novel during the war years. A hungry and desperate soldier knocks on the door of Ijeoma and her mother

asking for water. Her mother chases him out in a brutal way. Ijeoma understands that she did not do it for greed:

in a warped, war-induced sort of way, it made sense that she should find ways to shed us all: the soldiers, me, and the house. To shed, if she could have, all memories of the war. To shed, and shed, and shed. Like an animal casting off old air or skin. A lizard. A snake. A cat or a dog. Even chickens molt. To shed us all like a bad habit. Or maybe, simply, the way one casts off a set of dirty, thorn-infested clothes” (Okparanta, 2017: 33).

The soldier is a reminder of the war and by sending him away, Ijeoma’s mother wipes the painful memories connected to the war away.

Ijeoma is also the protagonist of strategies of forgetting. Exasperated and shocked by the Bible lessons, Ijeoma tries to “bury the memory of those lessons, to act as if they were not part of my reality, because claiming them would be like continuing to remember that former version of Mama, the one who believed so much that there was a demon in me” (Okparanta, 2017: 59). In another scene, Ijeoma is dancing with Nididi and, without being able to enjoy the moment, she forces herself to “banish all thoughts of Amina, and of Mama’s Bible studies, and of the grammar school teacher’s scolding, and of stonings” (Okparanta, 2017: 193). The same thing is repeated later when, unhappily married to Chibundu, she writes a letter to Nididi which contains the same words: “I banish all thoughts of you. I banish you. I banish you. I banish you” (Okparanta, 2017: 260). Finally, pregnancy is another way to forget, because Ijeoma realizes that motherhood would make her feel “more invested in the marriage”, so “to forget Nididi” (Okparanta, 2017: 242).

How shall we interpret these attempts of forgetting? Erll suggests that “forgetting is the very condition for remembering” and that “in processing our experience of reality, forgetting is the rule and remembering the exception” (Erll, 2011: 8). This means that forgetting must be interpreted as an element that is part of memory, just like remembering. In fact, as we have already seen, memory implies a selection of facts and things that are relevant for, and in the present. If selection constitutes an unavoidable part of memory, elimination is part of memory too, because selecting something is possible only by excluding something else. Maybe, saying that “memories are small islands in the sea of forgetting” (Erll, 2011: 9) is an exaggeration; however, forgetting as well as remembering is an integral part of memory.

Chapter 4: War memory of the writers

4.1 A memory from below

Half of a Yellow Sun and *Under the Udala Trees* focus on ordinary people, women, men and children who were not the ‘architects’ of the conflict, but they suffered it. Writers give voice to people that history has often forgotten, showing the impact of the war both on an individual and on a collective level. Inevitably, this aspect is also intertwined with that of memory. Deleting someone from history means ignoring his/her existence. And if that person has never existed, then his/her memories do not exist either. Therefore, the way Adichie and Okparanta are reinterpreting history through a perspective from below, not only restore the historical dignity of individuals that history has often forgotten, but they also recover their memories.

The word "history" includes within it the word "story". Adichie and Okparanta are both storytellers, not "historytellers", and their narrative reflects the loss of the prefix "hi". If history is focused on events that refer to the official and hegemonic history through which Historiography is represented, memories that Adichie and Okparanta recollect in their novels are focused on personal, particular and non-official stories. Having in mind this difference, Adichie and Okparanta have decided to give space to micro memories and to personal accounts related to one's own experiences of the war. In doing this, they have decided to focus on ordinary people, giving voice to those people that history has often forgotten.

In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, analysing the character of Ugwu, Ouma affirms that he represents the most emblematic case of Adichie's tendency to focus on ordinary characters, arguing that

Ugwu embodies the memories of ordinary living that arise out of his role as a houseboy, as well as the trauma memories of the war, having fought in it as a child soldier. He is therefore an embodiment of the composite memory scape of the novel [...] Adichie's return to the ordinary, through the narrative voice and vision of Ugwu is a unique perspective of historiography and memory in relation to the Biafran war [...] Ugwu's houseboy status and his historical voice and position in the novel competes with those of protagonists and classes who have hitherto been the main subjects of this war memory (Ouma, 2011: 16-18).

As Ouma points out, Ugwu represents a different Biafran perspective, given his "lower status" as a houseboy. Adichie's choice to make him a main character in the novel overturns the hegemonic and traditional History writing in which a character like Ugwu would seldom find a place. Obviously, focusing on minor characters, like Ugwu, also means telling their lives, in their ordinary appearance.

An example of this occurs when Ugwu's mother goes to Olanna's and Odenigbo's house in Nsukka to receive medical treatments. Before leaving and returning to her village, Ugwu's mother confessed to her son that she had found the strange smell coming from Olanna's mouth unbearable. Ugwu understands that she was referring to the toothpaste and he explains to his mother that "we use it to clean our teeth". Seemingly insignificant, this scene tells us a lot about Ugwu's dreams and aspirations, and Adichie points out how "Ugwu felt proud saying *we*, so that his mother would know that he too used it" (Adichie, 2017: 91).

Adichie's attention for everyday lives is also expressed through sexuality. During the war years, Ugwu falls in love with a girl and, dreaming of having sex with her, he remembers the *Concise Couples Handbook*, a sex guide, that he used to read in Nsukka, when he worked as a houseboy in Odenigbo's house. He starts to look for the book in Odenigbo's new house in Abba, and he "felt foolish because he knew there was no way the *Concise Couples Handbook* would be there" and "he felt a deep sadness at how few books there were on the table, in the whole house" (Adichie, 2011: 294). The same feelings of defeat and sadness emerge when Ugwu begins to write about war and he realizes he would never be able "to describe well enough the fear that dulled the eyes of mothers in the refugee camps when the bomber planes charged out of the sky" and "to depict the very bleakness of bombing hungry people" (Adichie, 2017: 398).

Sexual desires, fear in the eyes of mothers and their concern for the fate of their children are some of the main topics in Adichie's novel. In her short descriptions and essential details the writer highlights her different perspective from historiography, that is to give a place in her novel to individual and unique emotions and states of minds. In this way, Adichie tells the readers that Biafra war was not just a story of powerful men, military tactics and economic interests, but also a story of daily struggle for survival.

Ugwu is just one of the many characters on which Adichie focuses as an emblem of people's everyday life. In fact, through Olanna's character, Adichie offers other examples of her perspective from below. After moving to Abba, Olanna is tormented by memories of all the things, clothes and books that she had left in Nsukka and she feels upset realizing that villagers find her attachment to material things stupid (Adichie, 2017: 185). In Umuahia, Olanna and her family are forced to live all together in one room, and Adichie stresses Olanna's concern when she "could not image how she would live her with Odenigbo and Baby and Ugwu, eat and dress and make love in a single room" (Adichie, 2017: 326). Adichie also focuses on details that nobody would have thought of. When Olanna receives a parcel from an old friend, she feels a great joy in seeing that it contains "cans of dried milk, tea, biscuits, Ovaltine, sardines, the cartons of sugar, the bags of salt", but above all toilet paper, so "Baby would not have to use old newspapers for a while" (Adichie, 2017: 333). The way

in which Olanna somatizes the ' before/after war' changes is emblematic of ordinary people's fear of losing themselves in the chaos of a huge historical event, such as a war. Adichie, narrating about these ordinary lives, satisfies a human request, the one of ordinary people to communicate that they are also part of the "great history".

Building a perspective from below made of micro memories and personal accounts related to one's own experiences also means talking about customs, beliefs, traditions and proverbs. An example is the scene in which Olanna meets a mother forced to face the kwashiorkor's syndrome of her child, and she discovers the mother's belief about some "anti-kwashiorkor leaves" capable of healing the kwashiorkor (Adichie, 2017: 339).

In another scene, during a moment of great discomfort, Kainene recites to her sister an old proverb of her grandfather's, reminding her that "*O dikata njo, o dikwa mma*"¹⁸ (Adichie, 2017: 390). The examples above show Adichie's desire to give the readers not only historical facts and events, but also sensations and emotions of those who lived in those years. Adichie does not describe just what the war was like, about its winners and losers, but she emphasizes how war was perceived and faced by individuals in the small things of their everyday life. History tells us what happened, but a novel also tells us Richard's fear when he discovers that Port Harcourt was falling, because "if Port Harcourt fell, he would lose the town he had come to love, the town in which he loved; he would lose a bit of himself" (Adichie, 2017: 307). History, the one of academic books and of scholars' description tells us about how many people died during Biafra war, but Adichie tells us about the suffering of these losses as well, and how much Kainene hates those who died "for dying" (Adichie, 2017: 349).

Finally, another Adichie's statement as a "storyteller from below" occurs when, after telling Amala's story of being forced to seduce Odenigbo by his mother, she writes: "how much did one know of the true feelings of those who did not have a voice?" (Adichie, 2017: 250). If Biafra war official history has silenced these voices, Adichie's goal is to recover them. The best way to do it is to collect personal accounts and small facts of people's lives. The recollection of their memories therefore becomes the instrument through which it is possible to recover the "historical dignity" of these people and to find them a place in the "great history".

In *Under the Udala Trees*, the same perspective from below is analysed. Chinelo Okparanta is very clear about this point and she argues that without characters' ordinary lives there would have been no story to tell, not even the Biafran one. Through Ijeoma's words, Okparanta writes

There is no way to tell the story of what happened with Amina without first telling the story of Mama's sending me off. Likewise, there is no way to tell the story of Mama's sending me off without also

¹⁸ It means that things get worse and then they get better.

telling of Papa's refusal to go to the bunker. Without his refusal, the sending away might never have occurred, and if the sending away had not occurred, then I might never met Amina. If I had not met Amina, who knows, there might be no story at all to tell (Okparanta, 2017: 4).

Through this statement, Okparanta points out that her role as a storyteller implies to give voice to stories of ordinary life and to find them a place in history, describing for example the fear aroused by the precariousness of life during wartime. In the first pages of the novel, Okparanta immediately tells us of her terror to lose loved people, and the reader can easily grasp the difficulty of those years when Ijeoma's father, hugging his daughter, says:

I want to tell you something. It's nothing you don't really already know, but I want to tell it to you again, like a reminder. So you don't forget [...] I want you know that your papa loves you very much. I want you to always know it and to never forget it" (Okparanta, 2017: 8).

In chapter 2, Okparanta describes the first time Ijeoma goes to church to make a prayer to God concerning the war, and she does not hide Ijeoma's anger when she asks, "what kind of things occupied Him up there in heaven and kept Him from answering our prayers" and "what kinds of things were more important to Him than us, His very own children" (Okparanta, 2017: 13-14). Okparanta decides that it is in these details that the deepest essence of the war is achieved. The Biafra civil conflict was not only made of rivalries, international plans, military strategies and tactics, but also of moments of ordinary life that, paradoxically, humanized the war itself. War is in fact determined by and, above all, experienced by people. War is "a human episode" and, if it is observed in its human aspect, the best way to understand it is to observe personal reactions and emotions of individuals who experienced it.

As we have seen in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, also in *Under the Udala Trees* Okparanta focuses on people's material attachment to objects of their daily lives. In a scene, after the end of a raid, people come out into the street. There are those looking for their missing child, those looking for their mother; but there are also those looking for a "veranda chair" (Okparanta, 2017: 15). One might ask the sense of looking for a chair after a village has been bombed. It is clear that, in the precariousness of those days, people found comfort in little things, in those objects that reminded them what life was like before the war, such as Ijeoma's attachment for her father's old Bible after his death. Moreover, as in *Half of a Yellow sun*, it is not surprising that Okparanta decides to give space to costumes and traditions, like a proverb. A significant scene is the one in which her mother is forced to abandon Ijeoma because of the war. Before leaving Ijeoma, the mother gives to her daughter the father's Bible and reminds her an old proverb:

She fumbled with her bag, searching for something in it. When she found what was she was looking for, she pulled it out. It was Papa's old Bible, the one he used to read from every Sunday at church. She handed it for me, holding my hand in hers even as I held the book in my hand. "If God dishes you rice in basket..." she said. I knew the second half of the proverb. "Do not wish for soup" (Okparanta, 2017: 50).

In fact, as Halwbach points out, memory can be also observed through an "attachment to traditional values", such as a proverb (Halwbach, 1992: 120). As we have seen previously, the individual level of memory is intertwined with the collective one through the individual belonging to a group. Recollecting a group's memory means also recollecting its culture. Adichie and Okparanta not only deal with an approach from below, but also with an interplay and connection between an individual and a collective dimension.

After her father's death, Ijeoma is forced to take care of her mother who falls into a sort of depression that causes her the loss of appetite. Faced with her mother's refusal to eat, Ijeoma reflects on "the way in which worry dulled the appetite, the ways in which too much anxiety made it so that even the best-tasting food had the same appeal as a leaf of paper or a palmful of sand" (Okparanta, 2017: 29). Okparanta also describes conflictual impetuosity that had prevented Ijeoma's mother from teaching her daughter how to use a sewing machine (Okparanta, 2017: 247). There are also accounts of beautiful moments, such as when, after the war, Ijeoma and her mother can celebrate Christmas, remembering "the way Christmas festivities used to be", remembering them "like it was yesterday" (Okparanta, 2017: 268).

Through these scenes Okparanta highlights the complexity of the conflict as an event comparable to a medal: on the one side, there is an objective and official history; on the other side, there are feelings and emotions of those who have experienced the war. These personal accounts are reflected in people's daily lives. Giving space to these personal accounts, Adichie and Okparanta dismantle a hierarchical scale that puts only some voices at the top and ignoring others. In reinterpreting history through a perspective from below, Adichie and Okparanta not only restore the historical dignity of individuals that history has often forgotten, but also recover their memories.

4.4.1 A female perspective

Half of a yellow Sun and *Under the Udala Trees* are placed in a perspective from below and, in this perspective from below, there is a further sub-perspective: the female one. First of all, Adichie and Okparanta recollect the perspective of female characters but they also manifest their personal

perspective as female writers. Adichie and Okparanta activate through their novels a double process giving voice to their female characters as well as to themselves. Recalling Edwin Ardner's theory discussed in chapter 1, through their novels Adichie and Okparanta have manifested "the symbolic weight" (Ardner, 1975) of a specific group, the female one, expressing themselves as writers and narrating the Biafra war mainly through female characters.

In *Under the Udala Trees*, the story develops around Ijeoma, and her homosexuality implies that Ijeoma is surrounded by other women, such as Amina and Ndidi. The only two main male characters in the novel are Ijeoma's father and Chibundu. However, Okparanta 'eclipses' their presence. Her father dies during the war, and therefore her mother becomes the only parental figure. Chibundu, instead, becomes just a cover used by Ijeoma to hide her homosexuality. In this way, Okparanta develops *Under the Udala Trees* as a novel in which women are main protagonist.

In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Adichie also gives life to a story in which the strong gender is undoubtedly the female one. Kainene and Olanna are presented as two strong women capable of bearing the difficulties of war and coping with the shortcomings of their men. Furthermore, Adichie also builds a network of female solidarity, in which women join together and rediscover that they could be friends. For example, when Odenigbo betrays Olanna, she goes to her aunt for advice on what to do, and Auntie Ikefa reminds her: "you must never behave as if your life belongs to a man" (Adichie, 2017: 226). Another example occurs when, after moving to Umuahia, Olanna makes friends with Alice, her neighbour. Despite the war difficulties, the two women talk about frivolous subjects, such as the inability of men to give sexual pleasure to women, and Olanna immediately "sensed, between them, a vulgar and delicious female bond" (Adichie, 2017: 336).

The examples above show an intersection between female characters and stories of everyday life, so creating a female perspective from below. In fact, Adichie and Okparanta not only manifest their tendency to focus on personal accounts, emotions and feelings, but they also insert this perspective from below in a female context. In this way memory is also stressed, both on an individual and on a collective level. Firstly, Olanna, Kainene and the other women are described by writers as examples of individual memories. Secondly, their gender puts them in a collective dimension: women as a group. Moreover, the interplay between the individual and the collective level of memory is also emphasized through the intersection of two perspectives: the one from below and the women's one. In this way, Adichie and Okparanta not only reconstruct the memory of the war, but they also expose it through the intersection of many and new perspectives.

4.4.2 The danger of a single story

Within an analysis focused on a perspective from below, a place must be reserved to Adichie's concept of "the danger of a single story" discussed in the theoretical framework. In chapter 6 of *Half of a Yellow Sun*, talking to a Nigerian man about Igbo-Ukwu art, Richard confesses of being amazed by its beauty, and he says:

I've been utterly fascinated by the bronzes since I first read about them. The details are stunning. It's quite incredible that these people had perfected the complicated art of lost-wax casting during the time of the Vikings raid. There is so much marvelous complexity in the bronzes, just marvelous". The man asks him why he is so amazed by the beauty of those bronzes, as if Richard were skeptical that these people were "capable of such things" (Adichie, 2017: 111).

Adichie's irony emerges, and the writer recalls the danger of one-way stories that, for example, led many Europeans to consider the Africans incapable of producing works of art. In this way, Adiche brings to light the artistic memory of her people, restoring its value and authorship.

Another example occurs when two American journalists meet Richard to write articles about the situation in Biafra. One of them asks Richard if it is possible to see the place where the Biafran soldiers fired an Italian man who worked in an oil well¹⁹. Richard cannot avoid thinking that "thousands of Biafran were dead, and this man wanted to know if there was anything new about one dead white man" (Adichie, 2017: 369). The killing of a white man has obscured the complete view of facts, giving life to a single story in which African suffering finds no place in Western journalism. We have seen that the collective dimension is indispensable in the reconstruction of memory. However, this does not mean that the memory of a group is the only one. It is part of a larger spectrum in which collective memories of each group enjoy equal dignity.

Finally, the utmost awareness of the danger of a single story is achieved by its connection with the perspective from below of Ugwu's book "The World Was Silent When We Died". Emmanuel Mzomera Ngiwira has stressed how Adichie, through his presence, "troubles the issue of authorship by ascribing authorial agency to an individual who, being a mere houseboy, does not fit into the league of educated middle-class men usually associated with writing history" (Ngwira, 2014: 43). Ngwira also points out how Ugwu's book recalls Adichie's Ted talk on "power":

It is impossible to talk about the single story without talking about power. There is an Igbo word that

¹⁹Although I am not completely sure, I think that the journalist's request refers to an episode that actually happened during Biafran war. It could be possible that Adichie is referring to a massacre that took place on 9th May 1969 when a Biafran commando killed 10 Italian technicians and a Jordanian ("Eccidio di Biafra", 2018).

I think about whenever I think about the power structures of the world and it is *nkale*²⁰ – a noun that loosely translates into ‘to be greater than another’. Like our economic and political worlds, stories too are defined by the principal of *nkale*. How they are told, who tells them, when they are told, how many stories are told, are really dependent on power (Adichie, 2009).

Starting from Adichie’s talk, Ngwiri suggests that “power relations produce the knowing subject *versus* passive object binary, with the former having epistemological power over the latter” (Ngwira, 2014: 44). Through “The World Was Silent When We Died”, Adichie dismantles this binary and questions old convictions about those who have the right to tell a story. Ugwu does not belong to the upper middle class, nevertheless, he is part of a group involved in the Biafra war, especially when he joins the army. Halbwachs’ concept, according to which belonging to a group makes it possible to transform individual memories into a collective memory, gives Ugwu the right to remember and to build the memory of what is happening, through writing. Ugwu is not part of the privileged upper middle class, but the right to tell a story does not depend on one’s social status.

4.2 A fictional memory

In the Author’s note Adichie has pointed out an interesting aspect. She has declared that the character of Okeoma²¹ is inspired to Christopher Okigbo²², while Colonel Madu is inspired to Alexander Madiebo’s *The Nigerian Revolution and The Biafran War*²³. Every author, when writing, has a conscious or unconscious memory of previous readings. Voluntarily or involuntarily, he/she leaves in his/her work traces of memory of other previous texts, and these traces constitute and feed the phenomenon of intertextuality. The concept of intertextuality is also in line with Erll’s definition of

²⁰ Note Adichie’s constant reference to expressions and words of Igbo language, even if she is giving a speech in English.

²¹ Okeoma is a poet and he is one of the main protagonists of the academic meetings organized by Odenigbo in Nsukka before the outbreak of war.

²² Christopher Ifekandu Okigbo (Ojoto, 16 August 1932 - 1967) was a Nigerian poet and he is considered one of the greatest authors of African literature in English. During the Nigerian civil war, he sided with Biafra and he died during the conflict. He worked as a librarian at the University of Nigeria, in Nsukka, a city in which he began his literary career. This last aspect underlines Adichie’s trend to take inspiration from real contexts, such as the academic fervour that in those years characterized Nsukka, and to reconstruct them in the novel, for example through the academic meetings at Odenigbo’s place (“Christopher Ifekandu Okigbo”, 2018).

²³ The book tells the story of a retired general of the Biafran army who explains the reasons that led the rebels to fight for three years in order to serve their cause (African Books Collective, 2018).

a “memory of literature” (Erll, 2011: 68). Nevertheless, along with a memory “of” literature, Adichie’s and Okparanta’s novels are also characterized by a “memory in literature”, which refers to how memory is expressed in a literary text (Erll, 2011: 68).

In a fictional novel, the “memory in literature” is a fictional memory, as ‘fruit’ of the writers’ imagination. In fact, Adichie and Okparanta have used the historical reality just as a framework for the creation of their fictional characters and their stories. This implies that in their novels there is an “interplay between the real and the imaginary” constructed according to a balance in which characters’ fictitious stories are represented as something that could potentially have happened in the reality (Erll, 2011: 150).

This aspect leads to a distinction between Adichie’s and Okparanta’s historical novels and historiography. Erll suggests that a fictional writer could have some important advantages compared to a historian, arguing that “fictive narrators, the representation of consciousness, the integration of unproven and even counterfactual elements into the representation of the past, and the imagination of alternative realities belong to the privileges enjoyed by the symbolic form of literature” (Erll, 2011: 150).

In *Half of a Yellow Sun* the interplay between reality and imagination is essentially based on political issues and references to the main leaders of the civil war. In chapter 14, Adichie narrates the visit of Ojukwu to Odenigbo’s university, and she describes a crowd of students who have gathered to welcome him:

‘What shall we do? Shall we keep silent and let them force us back into Nigeria? Shall we ignore the thousands of our brothers and sisters killed in the North?’ ‘No! No!’ [...] ‘I want to tell you now that it may become a long-drawn-out war. A long-drawn-out war. Are you prepared? Are we prepared?’ ‘Yes! Yes! Ojukwu, *nye anyi egbe!* Give us guns! *Iwe di anyi n’obi!* There is anger in our hearts!’ (Adichie, 2017: 170-171).

In chapter 26, Olanna is listening to the radio, and suddenly she starts screaming: “Tanzania has recognized us!” (Adichie, 2017: 295). Odenigbo cannot believe her words, but all radio stations confirm what Olanna has announced: “Tanzania was the first country to recognize the existence of the independent nation of Biafra. Finally, Biafra existed” (Adichie, 2017: 295). After the announcement of the recognition, the bar that Odenigbo used to go to changes its name, from “Rising Sun Bar” to “Tanzania Bar” (Adichie, 2017: 297).

The examples mentioned above, even if they are the result of the writer's imagination, are based on real events. The visit of Ojukwu to Odenigbo’s university is based on real speeches held by the political leader in those years. The story of the “Tanzania Bar” also refers to a real event, when the

dramatic humanitarian crisis that was starving the population pushed Julius Nyerere's Tanzania to recognize the secessionist state.

Probably Ojokwu's visit narrated by Adichie had never occurred, such as probably a "Tanzania Bar" had never existed. However, these scenes are not only the result of Adichie's imagination. They come from real historical events, and Adichie's recollection of the Biafra memory is constructed according to an interplay between reality and imagination. The way in which she recalls the war is determined by facts that actually happened, but also by Adichie's desire to enrich history with fictitious details.

In *Under the Udala Trees*, Okparanta also refers to political leaders to give historical credibility to her novel. In chapter 24, Ijeoma, the grammar school teacher and his wife are listening to a Gowon speech on the radio announcing the end of the war and the future national unity. That evening, an army of Nigerian soldiers march in a parade along the road, screaming "One Nigeria! One Nigeria!", "all dressed up in green uniforms, berets on their heads, their guns held firmly across their chests" (Okparanta, 2017: 116). In chapter 11 Ijeoma realizes that she has become "a castaway", "a derelict child" (Okparanta, 2017: 55). In chapter 51, Okparanta describes, through Ndidi's words, the murder of two homosexual men by a homophobic group because of their sexual orientation (Okparanta, 2017: 205).

Again, even if the example mentioned above are the result of the writer's imagination, they are based on real events. Gowon had really given a speech to announce the end of the war. Thousands of children during the conflict really faced the loss of their parents, and war really produced waves of castaways and derelict children. The homosexual men of whom Okparanta is talking have probably never existed, but the fictitious memory of their death by Ndidi is built on real murders committed in Nigeria against homosexual people.

Therefore, if in a fictional novel there is an interplay between the real and the imaginary, in a "historical" fictional novel there is also an interplay between real memories and fictitious memories linked to the writers' imagination. This interaction arises from a double need: on the one hand, to give credibility to the novels, on the other hand to make the novels more engaging for the readers. Through this balance, Adichie and Okparanta give life to a compelling story in which the reader can revisit a historical event in a more captivating and suggestive way. This is one of the many privileges of literature: to inform and delight the reader at the same time.

4.3 Other perspectives of memory

Alongside with the aspects discussed before, Adichie and Okparanta have also engaged in other perspectives. The linguistic one is one of them. In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, during an academic meeting at Odenigbo's place, there is a discussion about music. One of the guests praises the singer Rex Lawson who, despite being a “true Nigerian”, did not remain attached to his Kalabari tribe, when he decided to sing in European languages²⁴. Odenigbo, who has completely different ideas, affirms: “this nationalism that means we should aspire to indifference about our individual culture is stupid” (Adichie, 2017: 109).

In a veiled manner, Adichie brings to light linguistic features and dilemmas (discussed in chapter 2), such as the issue of using minority languages in favour of majority ones, often considered stronger and more powerful. Nevertheless, as we have seen in many examples above, Adichie mediates this clash, reconstructing her people's memory in English, and at the same time inserting Igbo words, proverbs and expressions. In this way, not only does she reconstructs the memory of Biafra, but she also uses this memory to reconstruct the cultural memory of a group, the Igbo.

Adichie also broaches thorny issues, such as the one of an alleged connection between the massacre of Herero²⁵ and the Jewish Holocaust.²⁶ Again, the writer uses an academic meeting organized by Odenigbo to raise the question through a debate among the guests. In particular, one of them claims that it is absurd to believe in a connection between the two events, while Odenigbo argues that the Europeans “started their race studies with the Herero and concluded with the Jews” and that “of course there's a connection” (Adichie, 2017: 50). In this way, once again Adichie inserts the individual memories of a past event into a collective dimension, the one of two groups, the Herero and the Jews. Moreover, through Odenigbo's hypothesis of a possible connection between the two massacres, Adichie intertwines the collective memory of two different groups, describing memory as a collection of many collective memories.

²⁴ Rex Jim Lawson (4 March 1935 – 1971) was a Nigerian singer, trumpeter and bandleader (“Rex Jim Lawson”, 2018).

²⁵ The massacre of the Herero took place in Namibia between 1904 and 1907, and it was determined by the rebellion of the Herero people against the German colonial authority. The brutal way in which the suppression of the uprising took place made it a real genocide (“Guerre herero”, 2018).

²⁶ For more information on a possible connection see Kundrus, B. (2005), “From the Herero to the Holocaust? Some remarks on the current debate, *Africa Spectrum*, Vol. 40, No. 2, pp. 299-308.

Biafran memory is also connected with that of colonialism in Africa. In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, when Kainene introduces Richard to a Nigerian friend, Major Udodi, the latter expresses his disapproval of such relationships, calling them a new form of slavery:

The white man will poke and poke and poke the women in the dark but they will never marry them. How can! They will never even take them out to a good place in public. But the women will continue to disgrace themselves and struggle for the men so they will get chicken-feed money and nonsense tea in a fancy tin. It's a new slavery, I'm telling you, a new slavery (Adichie, 2017: 80).

Major Udodi's speech strongly recalls Frantz Fanon's words, that "these frantic women of color" become very soon aware that "white men do not marry black women" (Fanon, 1986: 49).²⁷ It is not possible to know to what extent, in the author's intentions, this passage was thought to be an explicit reference to Fanon's work. Nevertheless, it is possible to find traces of Erl's concept of "memory of literature" and of the return of elements of earlier works in new narratives (Erl, 2011: 67-68). This scene also reconfirms one of the main characteristics of memory, which is the recalling of past elements looking at the present. Colonialism is over, but Major Udodi, discovering the relationship between Kainene and Richard feels the need to recall those years.

Finally, in *Under the Udala Trees* it is possible to find the *Afropolitan* perspective. During the Bible lessons, Ijeoma's mother always reminds her that "*Nwoke na nwunye*. Man and wife. Adam *na* Eva", which means a heterosexual relationship, is the only possible love. (Okparanta, 2017: 67). However, Ijeoma is not convinced of this assumption and she starts to question the Bible:

I wonder about the Bible as a whole. Maybe the entire thing was just a history of a certain culture, specific to that particular time and place, which made it hard for us now to understand, and which maybe even made it not applicable for us today" (Okparanta, 2017: 83).

Ijeoma does not dispute the Bible itself; she questions the inability of applying its precepts today, suggesting a reassessment of the Bible as a text that must finally welcome an Eva-Eva and an Adam-Adam relationship in its interpretation. Ijeoma, therefore, proposes a revision of the Bible that cannot be dependent on the past, but which must be applied to the present.

The same desire to change things in the name of a better future is expressed many years later. Ijeoma has left her husband and enjoying her love with Ndidi. Her daughter Chidinma is an adult and

²⁷ For more information about the relationship between white men and black women see Fanon, F. (1986), *Black Skin, White Masks*, Pluto Press.

she teaches at the University of Lagos. At the university campus, an unfortunate episode occurs. Two homosexual students are beaten, but not killed, because of their sexual orientation. Ijeoma is scared by the news, but she is also proud of the fact that if her daughter had been there during that aggression, she would have stopped it. In fact, as Ijeoma points out, Chidinma is part

of that particular new generation of Nigerians with a stronger bent toward love than fear. The fact that she herself is not of my orientation does not make her look upon gays and lesbians with the kind of fear that leads to hate. Besides, she knows my story too well to be insensitive to the cause (Okparanta, 2017: 318).

Ijeoma talks about a “new generation of Nigerians” and her position recalls Selasi’s definition of *Afropolitanism*, according to which Africa and the Africans have changed compared to the past. The possibility of travelling and the encounter of different cultures have transformed today’s Africans into new citizens whose African roots do not preclude them greater openness towards the world. Okparanta’s appeal to change aims precisely at this new generation of Africans, to whom the writer herself belongs. This emerges through her decision to write a novel set during the civil war through the perspective of a homosexual relationship. The audacity of this choice is understandable only if we consider *Afropolitanism* from a narrative perspective that has influenced Okparanta and her works. Inevitably, her new *Afropolitan* identity can be considered as one of the many factors that gives to Okparanta the possibility to link the prohibition of a relationship Hausa/Igbo, inserted in a war context, with the prohibition of a relationship woman/woman.

A clear expression of this link is Ndidi’s dream described in the epilogue of the novel. Ndidi often dreams of a city “where love is allowed to be love, between men and women, and men and men, and women and women, just as between Yoruba and Igbo and Hausa and Fulani” (Okparanta, 2017: 321). Ijeoma asks her where this city is located, and each time Ndidi gives her the name of a different city, because “all of them are here in Nigeria” (Okparanta, 2017: 321).

Ndidi’s city of love recalls the “open city” described by Chielozona Eze, a Nigerian poet and philosopher who in the article “We, Afropolitans” points out aspects of *Afropolitanism* that can be found both in the identity of many writers and in their novels. Eze emphasizes how being *Afropolitan* does not mean being without roots, but rather coming from an “open city” whose citizens are “committed to openness” in the name of a “humanistic stance” (Eze, 2016: 117). According to Eze, *Afropolitans* are characterized by a special “disposition to the world” thanks to which what matter is “no longer how different we are from others, but rather what we can learn from them, from what we have in common with them” (Eze, 2013: 118).

It is because of this disposition to the world that Okparanta's openness to homosexuality could be understood as a call to diversity and as a place of learning. The sexual diversity of a homosexual person should not distance, but lead to a reflection on diversity itself as an enriching element. What is different is beautiful, because diversity is no longer a fault, but an opportunity. A homosexual person is like me, even if he/she is different from me. The openness to homosexuality can be considered a main feature of *Afropolitanism*: it is not a matter of denying the presence of diversity, but of exploiting diversity as a way to enrich our identity.

These trends of openness, such as the one shown by Okparanta in her novel, have made African identity a fluid identity, capable of understanding that today's Africa is different from yesterday's Africa, that "there are new stories to tell about" (Eze, 2016: 116-117). If writing about homosexuality in a novel about Biafra war would have been unthinkable fifty years ago, today it is not only possible, but it is also necessary. Okparanta not only perceives that there are new stories to tell, but that she must tell these stories, because the main *Afropolitan* feature, which is openness to the world, implies not only advantages, but also responsibilities.

In the case of Okparanta, these responsibilities come from a specific reality, the homophobic environment of Nigeria, and it is in this perennial link with Africa that the concept of *Afropolitanism* differs from the cosmopolitan one. As Susanne Gehrman notices, mobility is an essential point of *Afropolitanism*, and it comes from a cosmopolitan tradition in which it is defined as "the ability to move between and to inhabit different places and cultures" (Gehrmann, 2015: 1). The same definition of mobility can be applied to *Afropolitanism*, but in this case mobility implies a "privileged bonding with Africa" (Gehrmann, 2015). Furthermore, it should not be interpreted only as a physical mobility, but above all as a mental mobility. This is why Eze points out that this spatial mobility is only a symbol of an "interior mobility" linked to "how negotiable" the relation to the world is (Eze, 2016: 116).

Okparanta's "*Afropolitan* present", different from her predecessors' present, has allowed her to change and innovate the way in which a past event, like the Biafra war, can be revisited. For this reason, I have considered *Afropolitanism* as an important narrative perspective in discussing the past, given that, as Miriam Pahl has affirmed, *Afropolitanism* must be interpreted as "an articulation of critical engagement by contemporary African writers with issues of justice and humanity in a globalized world" (Pahl, Miriam, 2016: 77).

Conclusion

The present thesis aimed at analysing the literary representation of the Biafra war, with a special focus on the production of memory, both on an individual and on a collective level, through two fictional novels: *Half of a Yellow Sun*, by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and *Under the Udala Trees*, by Chinelo Okparanta. My attention on memory was determined by the desire to understand why some contemporary writers have decided to narrate an historical event that happened 50 years ago. This subject gave me the opportunity to look at memory and at the cultural production of memory as important cornerstones of our societies in recollecting events belonging to the past. The ways in which memory can be transmitted and reproduced are numerous. In this thesis, I have focused on literature as a tool for the cultural expression of memory. The decision to analyse literary texts through a perspective of memory has allowed me to investigate the behaviours and the attitudes of people in relation to a traumatic event, such as war. Moreover, the literary analysis offered me the opportunity to look at memory as a phenomenon whose manifestations and angles are multiple.

In analysing the literary representation of the memory of Biafra, I have organized my analysis according to two levels of memory: the memory of the characters of the novels and the memory of the writers. The presence of two levels of memory has led me to divide the work of analysis into two parts, analysing each of the two levels of memory through some theories, strategies and narrative perspectives.

In chapter 3, through the analysis of the first level of memory, the characters' one, I focused on what the characters remember about the Biafra war, both when the war is over, and when it is still in progress. In doing this, I have referred to Maurice Halbwachs' theory according to which memory is distinguished into an individual memory and into a collective memory, and these two dimensions influence each other. The choice to use Halbwachs' theory was determined by the identification of these two levels of memory in the selected novels as well. In fact, both in *Under the Udala Trees* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*, it is possible to find memories belonging to the personal experiences of each character. At the same time, these personal memories are inserted into a collective dimension of memory, which refers to that of a specific group, the Igbo one. Halbwachs' theory has been very useful because it does not imply an annulment of individual memories, but it allowed me to insert the personal experiences of each character into a context of shared belonging.

What emerged through this first level of analysis of chapter 3 is how Adichie and Okparanta have offered the reader narratives focused not only on accounts of the war, but also on details, feelings and emotions. Moreover, through the intersection of the individual memories of each character with the collective dimension of the Igbo memories, the writers have also intertwined their memories with

those of their characters, showing the intergenerational character of memory as an expression of identity. Narrating the Biafra war becomes a tool to connect more generations, also involving the generation of those who have not directly experienced the conflict. In particular, the memory of Biafra becomes part of the culture of the Igbo people, allowing even second-generation writers, such as Adichie and Okparanta, to share a story that, through memory, also becomes their story.

In chapter 3, I also showed the strategies used by the characters to remember, or to forget painful memories of the war. In fact, memory does not only refer to the contents of memory itself, but it also refers to the ways used by people to recall the past. The most interesting aspect of my findings was the discovery of two kinds of strategies activated by the characters. On one hand, they try to preserve the memory of the war in order to make sense of their pain and their suffering. On the other hand, they also try to erase what happened in order to delete the traumas associated with the conflict. In a way, both the strategies of remembering and of forgetting represent tools of survival. Moreover, they have a greater impact if observed in a collective dimension, because they imply the deletion of memories belonging to a group and not only to an individual. It is also interesting to note how the same character can activate both strategies of remembering and of forgetting, and therefore that they are not in a relationship of exclusion.

In the analysis of the second level of memory (chapter 4) I detected that the transmitted memory of the writers was shaped by some chosen narrative perspectives. The first narrative perspective is the one from below, given that both writers have decided to focus on ordinary people and on their daily lives. In this way, Adichie and Okparanta have offered a “more intense” version of the Biafra war, not limited to a mere historical reconstruction of the facts. The result is a dismantling of hierarchical narratives that are unable to give voice to the stories of ordinary people. The Biafra war has involved, indirectly or directly, a multitude of people; therefore, each of them has the right to be part of its cultural memory.

The writers have also intersected the perspective from below with a narrative female perspective, which represents one of the most interesting newness of their works. In fact, in a narrative landscape dominated by male writers, Adichie and Okparanta have debunked the belief that the war is only a male prerogative, both as writers and by choosing women as main characters of their novels. Alongside with this female perspective from below, I have also identified another narrative perspective, namely that of telling stories in which there are no prejudices or exclusions, and nobody has a privileged position compared to someone else. The most evident result is the denial of the hegemonic power of a privileged social status in telling a story. Everyone has the right to express their voice. The power to tell a story is not understood as something that belongs only to those who

are socially stronger. Power is the will to express one's voice, even when there are “more powerful voices” that could silence it.

The choice of fictional novels is another narrative perspective used by Adichie and Okparanta. In both novels, the Biafra war is the scaffolding of the characters' fictional stories and memories. Adichie and Okparanta have created a balance in which the vicissitudes of the characters are represented as something that could potentially have happened in the reality. Therefore, even if the memories of the characters are the result of the writers' imagination, they are immersed in a war that actually happened. In this way, Adichie and Okparanta were able to adorn and enrich a historical event with suggestive details in order to capture the readers' attention.

My analysis also detected other narrative perspectives of memory. The first one is a linguistic memory, constructed through the interplay between the English language and the Igbo one. In both novels, even if Adichie and Okparanta have reconstructed the memory of their own people in English, they have also inserted Igbo words, proverbs and expressions. In this way, they have not only recollected the historical memory of the Biafra war, but they have also recalled the cultural memory of a group, the Igbo one.

In *Under the Udala Trees* I have also analysed the *Afropolitan* perspective. *Afropolitanism* represents one of the novelties of my thesis, and the results of this novelty were expressed through new horizons and new approaches in reconstructing the memory of Biafra by Okparanta. In fact, *Afropolitanism* manifests itself in a greater openness of mind of the new generation of African writers and, inevitably, this openness to the world is also reflected in their narratives. An emblematic example is the homosexual story that Okparanta narrates in her novel. The writer does not only limit herself to reconstruct the memory of the civil war, but she offers an alternative and innovative version of it.

In this way, Okparanta communicates the extremely changeable nature of memory, and the necessity to link memory to the current and present situation. In fact, memory has its roots in the past, but it always manifests itself in the present of those who recollect that past. If few years ago it would have been unthinkable to recount the memory of the Biafra war through the lens of a homosexual relationship, now Okparanta's *Afropolitan* identity has allowed her to change and innovate the way in which a past event, like a war, can be revisited. The *Afropolitan* openness of mind also explains the interest of contemporary writers in narrating an event that happened 50 years ago. This interest stems from the desire to offer a new contribution to the literary production on the Biafra war, but above all from the awareness that this contribution must be innovative. Talking about an old subject does not mean talking about it in an old way.

However, the present thesis is limited by the exclusion of other novels and by restricting the analysis to two case studies. Moreover, since there is not a comparison with other novels published

during or immediately after the outbreak of the war by male writers, it can be difficult to highlight the points of originality of the selected novels both in contents and in narrative perspectives. Therefore, I hope that this thesis can offer a starting point for further research through comparative analysis of the selected novels with other ones. An example could be that to adopt opposing criteria to those I used to analyse *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Under the Udala Trees*, and to see if changing the selection of criteria would generate other results.

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