Southern Nigeria and the politics of memory: literary accounts on the Biafra war and the minorities’ struggle

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Subject/main field of study: African Studies
Course code: AS3013
Credits: 15
Date of examination: 09/06/2020

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Abstract

The Nigeria-Biafra war (1967-70) was a critical event for the country and on an international level: furthermore, it forged forever the memory and narrative of Igbo people, authors, politicians and activists and minority groups. I chose this topic because I have always been interested in how political issues have been represented and argued in literature, how the authors and intellectuals have narrated the struggle and the fracture of such a complex nation as Nigeria and how much powerful collective memory can be for the personal and cultural story of a population. What can make the difference in remembering is even how a story and a particular memory is narrated through time. The aim of this thesis is therefore to explore the meaning of the political use of memory of the war through the testimonies of two contemporary fictional novels by Nigerian writers.
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CHAPTER 1: Introduction

1.1 Objective of the thesis and research questions
The objective of the thesis is to disseminate the meaning of collective memory and the political use of memory through two examples of narratives on the Biafran civil war and especially to compare the experiences of two Nigerian authors coming from different historical contexts. I have focused on two examples of fictional narratives by contemporary Nigerian authors, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Ken Saro-Wiwa.

To follow a path and to critically analyze the literature, I developed two main research questions to keep in mind throughout my work:

- How are collective memory and political use of memory carried out in contemporary narrative on Biafra?

- How can we observe these two concepts through the comparison between Adichie’s and Saro-Wiwa’s works?

1.2 Methodology
In my thesis I have applied a method of literature narrative revision, employing some important anthologies and collection of articles by different authors as the starting point of my work and the main body of the concepts I took into consideration. I have analyzed the question of representation and memory of the conflicts in literature in Writing the Nigeria-Biafra war (Falola and Ezekwem, 2016). Through the concepts of collective memory and the political use of memory in fictional narrative in more specific articles, then, I have analyze how the Biafran insurgency against the Nigerian Federal Government (1967-1970) has been
represented and narrated in contemporary literature by the two authors Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Ken Saro-Wiwa.

I define the concept of collective memory as the set of memories, stories, information and experiences lived firsthand by a certain social group or conveyed among them, which contributes to unite them and build their group’s identity. Collective memory can be made of and kept alive by oral traditions, folklores, stories and myths, songs, poems and literary texts, and monuments. Secondly, with the political use of memory I mean the systematic use, by a state, a group or an institution of their story and their memory, linked to a particular event lived by the community, and the political use of that specific memory in a public sphere and through public narrations, in order to shape the actions of collective groups and their own memories in that direction.

These two concepts are relevant and useful in my study because they are deeply involved in the experience of the Biafran civil war. After the end of the war, the official Nigerian government has adopted a certain policy of silence and promoted a biased memory of the Biafran conflict; in other words, the political use of the civil war memory has not been totally fair and objective with regard to what the Biafran population and the minorities involved went through. Therefore direct and indirect testimonies of the conflict by authors such as Adichie and Saro-Wiwa, who supported ideologically and actively the minorities’ cause, are fundamental because they show the power of collective memory passed down from generation to generation. Moreover, they embody the concept of political use of memory because through their works they show us the contradictions of the conflict and its manipulation by the government of Nigeria. They give voice, and therefore memory, to the least represented minorities involved and they carry on their own counter-politics of memory. In fact, collective memory can be reshaped and weakened for political and social purposes, and the Biafran civil war literature represents an important example of this concept.

I have chosen precisely these two authors because I see a close correlation between their works. Unlike Saro-Wiwa, Adichie can be considered actually a pro-Biafran writer and she did not experience the conflict firsthand. Moreover, their fictional novels have been published more than twenty years apart. However, although the two authors come from different historical contexts, they can be seen as complementary accounts because they both understand and bring up the most troubled part of the war, which is the role and the exploitation of the minorities. Therefore the time lapse between the two novels is not a deficiency but rather the key to understand why these two works are correlated.

1.3 Theoretical framework

1.3.1 Collective memory

Since the collective memory is associated with a specific social group, it is also often referred to also as social memory. Anugwom² explains that there are two separate schools of thought in this field: the social constructionists argue that people construct memories of what they remember in order to serve personal or group agendas, whereas the theorists of cultural domination claim that memory is a tool of domination and is always a process dominated by the privileged; yet, both agree that people use their memories and their past to reach specific interests.

One of the most important theorists in memory studies is Maurice Halbwachs, whom in his famous work On collective memory³ argue about the strong intersection between the individual and collective level of memory: in fact, these influence each other in a way that an individual’s memory is deeply conditioned by the meaning and power that the group he identifies himself with attributes to a particular event or moment in the past. «In Halbwachs notion, memories or past events are recalled by

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the individual externally and in this sense it is the group to which the individual belongs that gives him the means to reconstruct memories»⁴.

Moreover, collective memory has a strong relation with history and, as we know, the past has an enormous power on the present and the future; some academics such as Hobsbawm⁵ argue that memory is actively affecting the present and has been exploited for specific purposes in the present. In relation to the Biafran civil war experience, memory is oriented both to past and present and may be constructed to legitimize the action of both the parties involved in order to achieve their own goals, intended to be a collective good for their social groups⁶.

Since the collective memory we are focusing on belongs to groups and social movements challenging these principal authorities and ruling elites in Nigeria, the supporters of Biafra independence, it is correct to identify it as “counter-memory”, a concept developed by Focault⁷ which means the alternative memory created by these groups in contraposition to an oppressive official memory. This concept leads to the other fundamental theoretical framework of my thesis: the politics of memory.

1.3.2 The political use of memory

The previous literature and researches on this topic agree that the group or institution which is promoting the political use of memory is trying to control the public narrations of a particular event, in order to control even the community and their memories, and therefore is using the past for specific purposes in the present and the future⁸.

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⁴ Anugwom, From Biafra to the Niger Delta conflict, p. 15.
⁵ Hobsbawn, Eric and Ranger, Terence (eds), The Invention of Tradition, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.
⁶ Anugwom, From Biafra to the Niger Delta conflict, p. 19.
In the case of Nigeria, on the one hand the central government since the end of the Biafran war has suppressed the deep causes of the conflict, neglecting even the teaching of this fact in the schools and, in general, relegating it as a taboo subject. As Onuoha asserts, the Nigerian state adopted a hegemonic narrative shaping the official history and memory of the war to suit its own vision, interests and politics, addressing the conflict as a “war for national unity”, and in doing so minimizing its real causes and outcomes.

On the other hand, the Igbo people and the Biafran secessionists actuated, and still do in the present, their own counter politics of memory, addressing the conflict as a war for their own liberation and therefore a secessionist war. Their narrative is basically built on blaming the government for the atrocities suffered by the Igbo and their killings. Their scope is to emerge as the only victims of the conflict, especially in the eyes of the international community. The suppression of Biafran anti-nationalist sentiments has accentuated somehow this kind of narrative and most of the fictional literature by Biafran authors and intellectuals is pointing in this direction, contributing to reinforce this particular collective memory. Confirmed in any case the injustice against them, the secessionists too consciously left something “behind”, excluding it from their memory and history; for example, their internal division and the non-support of the Igbo elite, which was another principal reason for their defeat, and the almost forced involvement of other minority groups in the cause for Biafra, such as the Ijaw and the Ogoni, in order to not lose the essential oil-rich territories. The minority groups in Nigeria, in the case of the war the ones from the Niger Delta region, have also their specific narrative which carries their collective memory, blaming both the Nigerian government and the Biafran secessionists for having used and exploited them exclusively because of the economic and strategic importance of their lands.

As we have already observed, when the dominant force suppresses other memories there may be the emergence of alternative or counter memory. In fact, «while state memory captures narratives of unity, fairness, and the wholesomeness or

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10 Falola and Ezekwem, *Writing the Nigeria-Biafra war*, p. 172.
indivisibility of the state, contrary narratives of marginalization, social injustice, modern slavery and colonialism by dominant and ethnic majority groups are privileged at the substate levels»

Many African writers have aimed to bring to the awareness of society their perceptions of the injustices and moral failings that plague their nations. In Nigeria, from Chinua Achebe to Wole Soyinka and Ken Saro-Wiwa, they narrated the memory of certain social groups who saw their story distorted by the central authority, and this is not surprising since the country was ruled by military regimes and puppet democratic governments from 1975 until 1999. In fact, one of the problems militating against the entrenchment of social justice in Africa is the reckless use of power by leaders, and until this power does not compromise with its history and its own past, adopting a politics of social justice and truth, these minority groups will continue to see themselves as excluded and they will carry on their detachment from the state, making the national healing more far and more painful. In my opinion, this is the intent in Saro-Wiwa and Adichie’s novels, who refuse to label the war merely as a conflict between two ethnic groups, and who are able to show and metaphorically narrate the atrocities of every war and the sufferings of every group.

1.4 Source materials

In my thesis I have analyzed two well-known fictional novels by the aforementioned authors, published more than twenty years apart but related to the same historical event, the Biafran civil war: Sozaboy: A Novel in Rotten English, by Ken Saro-Wiwa, originally published in 1985, and Half of A Yellow Sun by Chimamanda Ngozi

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11 Anugwom, From Biafra to the Niger Delta conflict, p. 22.
13 Ibid., p. 65.
Adichie, published in 2006. I chose to analyze these two novels because, although they belong to different historical contexts, I believe it is possible to trace a sort of continuity which focuses on a missed but fundamental element of the civil war, that is the role of the minorities.

Although the strong correlation and the same historical set, the background of the two authors is really different and this directly affects their narration. Adichie can be considered a pro-Biafran writer because, although she wants to raise awareness about all the minorities involved in the war, she also strongly supports the cause of his people, the Igbo, one of the three largest ethnic groups and much penalized during the civil war. Saro-Wiwa instead belongs to one of the minority groups in the deep south of the country, the Niger Delta region, and he was one of the principal intellectual figures against the cause of the Biafra and the official government of Nigeria. The strength of his novel, compared to Adichie, is that it is a thought-provoking work also on the critical role of the oil in war and its manipulation by both parties.

Chiamanda Ngozie Adichie was born in Enugu in 1977 and moved at the age of 19 in the US to pursue her studies in literature and creative writing. She is considered one of the most prominent writers in contemporary anglophone African literature and she is often described as an example of an Afropolitan writer. Her works are mostly fictional novels and short stories which mainly deal with critical themes such as racism, African diaspora, feminism and intellectual responsibility for the new generations. Adichie divides her life between these two countries and she has become a reference point and personality, other than in her own homeland, for the young big community of Nigerian-Americans. Among them, Biafrans like Adichie support ideologically and actively the Biafran cause through online forums and social media activities, showing the power of collective memory passed down from generation to generation. In fact Adichie herself is not a direct witness of the war, but the memory of the conflict which her grandparents experienced is still vivid and

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16 Falola and Ezekwem, Writing the Nigeria-Biafra war, p. 172.
alive in her literature. Adichie’s *Half of A Yellow Sun* demonstrates the author’s desire to disrupt a certain Igbo discourse crystallized on the ethnic marginalization narrative, recounting the civil war between fiction and reality in a disillusioned way, taking into account the real political interests of the war and trying to create more inclusivity for the ethnic minorities groups involved in the conflict. At the same time, the work witnesses the long way Nigeria still has for a peaceful and total reconciliation, and the importance to forgive, but not forget, the atrocities of the conflict, as a result of the official post-war politics of (neglected) memory.

Ken Saro-Wiwa (1941-1995) was not only an environmental activist, an entrepreneur and a politician, but also and mostly a writer and a poet. Through his novels and poems he fought for the cause of the Ogoni. In fact, according to him, there is no separation between the writer and his political undertaking, since this figure has to be the intellectual man or woman of action. Saro-Wiwa was a direct witness of the Biafran civil war. In his works he principally denounces the exploitation of the minorities’ lands reduced to dust by the greediness of oil multinationals and the federal government. *Sozaboy*, his first published novel, recounts the struggle of the Delta minorities involved in the war, but can be seen as a work that shows the devastation of humanity and the senselessness of every war and violence. Saro-Wiwa’s intent is to depict the image of a divided Nigeria and to raise awareness on the underestimated role of the minorities, forced in war of which they did not understand and share the cause; moreover, the principal cause of conflict, the oil, is not even once directly named, but can be deduced from many factors in the novel. In fact the novel can be seen as a representation of the brutality of oil politics, regardless of ethnic groups’ struggles. It can be affirmed then that Saro-Wiwa's intent in the novel is much more political than that of Adichie.

**1.5 State of research and contribution of my study into the field**

The number of studies about the meaning of collective memory of the Biafra war is huge; also, there are many novels in fictional literature set in this period, from the
personal memories of Chinua Achebe, considered the father of anglophone African literature, to more recent contemporary authors Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Chinelo Okparanta, Chukwuemeka Ike. One of the most exhaustive works about the literature on Biafra and a “healing” memory through narrative is *Writing the Nigeria-Biafra War* by Toyin Falola and Ogechukwu Ezekwem. The authors focus on the concepts of literary separatism and the politics of memory of the Biafra war by the Nigerian government, which basically did not give the Biafrans and their claims a fair recognition after the conflict; in their words, «[...] memory shapes the nature of and trend in one's knowledge, understanding and interpretation of the past and its meaning, particularly because we are essentially what we remember and know».

Another research on this topic is *The Politics of Memory: Truth, Healing and Social Justice* by Ifi Amadiume & Abdullah An-Na’im which I also implied in examining more in depth one of the theoretical frameworks of this thesis. The book is a collection of essays focusing on the concepts of memory, reconciliation, and healing politics after conflicts and civil wars in Africa and even in Latin America. Beyond the post-Biafran war and the Igbo situation in Nigeria, cases such as the 1994 genocide in Rwanda and the Amnesty Committee for Apartheid in South Africa are discussed. Wole Soyinka, a Nobel Prize Nigerian poet and playwright, is one among the contributors: according to him, «the call for reparations remains a potent instrument for that internal awakening into an era of global healing, ushering in an era of a reconciliation that is surely the hope of humanity in this new millennium». In all the authors’ view, the healing of atrocities suffered in the past is fundamental for reconciliation and for the prevention of new conflicts in the future.

A work which links the past conflict to the present situation in the country is *From Biafra to the Niger Delta conflict: memory, ethnicity and the state in Nigeria* by Edlyne Eze Anugwom. In particular, the author focuses on the nexus between

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17 Falola and Ezekwem, *Writing the Nigeria-Biafra War*.
18 Ibid., p. 166.
20 Ibid., p. 37.
memory and social conflict in postcolonial Nigeria, a nation-state weakened by the
etnicization of politics, a fragile federal system, the remembrances of the English
colonial indirect rule, and most of all the destructive logic of petro-politics. According
to Anugwom, «social memory embodies narrative of power and contestation along ethnicized divide, which generate and foster conflicts and dictate the response of the state». This concept is fundamental in my thesis, since I put in comparison the official and mainstream state narrative of the conflicts, which foster an incomplete memory, with the one promoted by the victims themselves, who through their own narrative try to reshape and reinforce the memory of their group.

My research can be considered particular compared to these previous works, because I have compared two contemporary Nigerian novelists who belong to different backgrounds but whose novels are correlated and connected not only by the painful experience and atrocities of the war. In fact, the two novels in my view want to disrupt the binary representation of the war between Biafra and Nigeria, between Igbo and Hausa, between victims and perpetrators, in favour of a broader and more realistic view of the civil war, taking both in consideration the critical role of every minority group involved. Moreover, I think my study will contribute to this particular field because I will show how these two fictional novels address a still unsolved problem in the Nigerian society. Through the two authors’ voice and narration, it is understood that the national question in Nigeria cannot be addressed without first resolving the relevant and complementary challenge of the “minority question”. Literary accounts from contemporary authors such as Adichie and Saro-Wiwa prove the importance of collective memory and counter-narratives which include the struggles of minorities.

1.6 Outline of the chapters

This thesis is organized in four chapters. In chapter one, I will introduce the main objective, the research questions and the methodology adopted. Moreover, I will

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22 Ibid., p. 1.
23 Ibid., p. 4.
illustrate the concepts of my theoretical framework: collective memory and the political use of memory. Finally, I will list and introduce my main source materials and I will present a brief overview of the state of research of the topic, listing the principal studies of relevance and explaining the particularity and innovation of my own research compared to the previous works.

In chapter two I will give firstly a brief overview on the history of the Biafran war, in order to explain the principal historical and political features of the event. Secondly, I will introduce the principal literary accounts of the official and counter narrative of the civil war, discussing the point of view of the parties’ involved and especially the controversial work of Chinua Achebe.

In chapter three I will focus on my two case studies, the novels Sozaboy and Half of A Yellow Sun from Saro-Wiwa and Adichie, who were culturally and personally involved in the event, describing the problem of objectivity and the importance of collective memory through their points of view in narrative. Through the analysis and interpretation of some passages in their novels I will discuss the main concepts promoted by the authors regarding the contradictions of the Biafran war.

In the fourth conclusive chapter I will demonstrate and explain the strong link and correlation between the two books, putting the resulting issue in relation to a more international and comprehensive view on the present challenges in Nigeria.
CHAPTER 2: The politics of literature and the narrated collective memory

2.1 Brief overview of Nigeria and the Biafran war

Map 1: Biafra and Niger Delta regions in Nigeria.

The Federal Republic of Nigeria is located in the West coast of Africa, confining with Niger, Chad, Cameroon, Benin and the Atlantic Ocean, and is often referred to as the “Giant of Africa”, since it is the most populous country in the continent and one of the most economically powerful. Prior to the colonial contact, the areas known today as Nigeria were inhabited by different groups and peoples, and except for commerce or religion relations, these were in minimum contact with each other. The country is one of the richest in terms of ethnic groups: the number amounts to more than

26 Anugwom, From Biafra to the Niger Delta conflict, p. 43.
250 different cultures and languages\textsuperscript{27}. Nigeria is currently divided in 36 states, since 1996\textsuperscript{28}, plus the Federal Capital Territory in which is located the capital Abuja.

In spite of this multiethnicity, there have always been three major ethnic groups. In fact the three main regions in which Nigeria is split are each dominated by one ethnic group: the Hausa-Fulani, who lived in the wide North of the country and were brought together through the spread of Islam and the establishment of the Sokoto Caliphate in the XIX century\textsuperscript{29}; the Yoruba in the South West, in which culture coexisted Christianity and Islam in equal part; and the Igbo in the South East, who lived in the region called Biafra, because is the piece of land directly adjacent to the Bight of Biafra, and which history is shaped by the Atlantic slave trade and a long tradition of Christianity. Many scholars agree on the fact that, compared with the Yoruba and the Hausa-Fulani, the Igbo presented a sustained resistance to British intervention and rule, and this was because of the egalitarian nature of their social authority patterns\textsuperscript{30}. In the Niger Delta region coexisted, instead, many other minority groups, such as the Urhobo, Isoko, Itsekiri, Ijaw, and Ogoni: «these communities generally share a highly republican political tradition, with each village or city clinging ferociously to its independence»\textsuperscript{31}. Other considerable ethnic groups in terms of numbers are the Edo, the most numerous group from Benin City, in Southern Nigeria, and Tiv people, which constitute a large majority of the Middle Belt region, in the central part of the country.

The British colonial rulers, in practice, divided the population along the principal ethnic lines, but incorporated the groups in a centrally governed federal state in 1914\textsuperscript{32}. However the influence of the colonial power was different between the Southern and the Northern Protectorate. As Maier explains, the British administered Northern Nigeria through a system called indirect rule, that allowed the local traditional authorities, the sultan and the emirs, to continue exercising more or less

\textsuperscript{27} Obi, \textit{Oil and the minority question}, p. 97.

\textsuperscript{28} Falola and Ezekwem, \textit{Writing the Nigeria-Biafra war}, p. 23.

\textsuperscript{29} Anugwom, \textit{From Biafra to the Niger Delta conflict}, p. 44.


their power, even on behalf of the British rule, and the Islamic code, the Sharia, was still permitted\textsuperscript{33}. The situation was quite the opposite in the South, where the British exerted a direct rule and administered the territory in a more significant way, through a limited and selective Western education and with the help of the Christian missionaries. This division between the North and the South created a situation in which the differences between the regions were sharply perpetrated\textsuperscript{34}, and where the struggle over the control of state power became not only between the North and the South, but between Islam and Christianity and among the Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo tribes, which competed for state resources coming especially from oil revenues\textsuperscript{35}. Since then, the Nigerian politics has been a power struggle masked by ethnicity, because each group is in competition with the other in order to grab the power\textsuperscript{36} and their “piece of the national cake”, and it is usual the prevailing mentality of “the winner takes all”\textsuperscript{37}.

The situation exacerbated even more after the independence, granted on the 1st of October in 1960, when Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, a northerner, was nominated the first prime minister of independent Nigeria\textsuperscript{38}. Since the Northern region created by the British was much bigger than the East and the West one together, the structural imbalance in the federation gave Northern Nigeria a complete 50 per cent representation in the federal parliament, facilitating the region to have an almost permanent control of the federal parliament\textsuperscript{39}. On the economic side, instead, it was since the British protectorate that the South enjoyed surplus economic revenue and was socially and politically more developed, while the North accumulated deficits and debits and necessitated substantial financial subsidies\textsuperscript{40}. Moreover, according to Maier, on the one hand «the Northern people lacked the educational skills needed to compete against their southern compatriots, the Yoruba and the Igbos [...]}. In the

\textsuperscript{33} Maier, \textit{This house has fallen}, p. 11.
\textsuperscript{34} Falola and Ezekwem, \textit{Writing the Nigeria-Biafra war}, p. 22.
\textsuperscript{35} Heerten and Moses, \textit{The Nigeria-Biafra war}, p. 173.
\textsuperscript{36} Anugwom, \textit{From Biafra to the Niger Delta conflict}, p. 48.
\textsuperscript{37} Falola and Ezekwem, \textit{Writing the Nigeria-Biafra war}, p. 48.
\textsuperscript{38} Maier, \textit{This house has fallen}, p. 11.
\textsuperscript{40} Falola and Ezekwem, \textit{Writing the Nigeria-Biafra war}, p. 21.
economy, the civil service, and the military, the north feared being swamped. On the other hand, the South-Eastern region was increasingly isolated and the ethnic minority groups, together with the Igbo, feared the domination from the North.

These economic and political discrepancies, combined with the strong ethnicization of the politics and a non-existing national consciousness and feeling, brought to a point of no return and to the outbreak of the Nigerian civil war, known as the Biafran war, fought from 1967 until 1970 between the Federal Republic of Nigeria and the secessionist state of Biafra. In particular, as explained by Omagu the background causes to the war were several and clear:

a) the perpetuation of a regionalist federal system that gave insufficient recognition to the country’s diverse ethnic groups, of which the ones in minority felt a discriminatory domination and an unbalanced representation in the parliament;

b) the replacement of the regional system with a multistate federal structure, with 19 states in the North and 17 in the South;

c) the growing domination of public finances by oil revenues, derived largely from the southern minority areas, in which the oil was discovered in the late 50s by the multinational oil company Shell. It is clear that the chronic illnesses of Nigeria, an unbalanced federal system and an intense regionalism, have strong roots in the colonial period.

On the eve of the civil war, in the Nigerian political scene there were three principal parties that reflected the regional division of the country:

a) Nnamdi Azikiwe, Igbo, was the leader of the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC) and he would have been the first president of Nigeria in 1963;

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41 Maier, This house has fallen, p. 11.
b) the Yoruba Obafemi Awolowo founded in 1944 the left-leaning party Action Group (AG), which was in competition with another one in the Western Region, the Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP) led by Samuel Akintola;

c) finally, the North had the Northern People’s Congress (NPC), led by Ahmadu Bello and which was actually ruling with the prime minister Balewa: the NNDP eventually allied with the NPC.

The situation was that the ruling North was much more unified than the West, in which the Yoruba were slowed down by their internal divisions, and the East, in which the Igbo and the NCNC had to deal with the demands from the minority groups: the two parties did not collaborate to face the powerful NPC and, as asserted by Falola and Ezekwem, the North essentially controlled the federal government, creating an atmosphere of reluctance and distrust among the people.

On the night between the 14th and the 15th of January, in 1966, a group of five Igbo officers attempted to overthrow the civilian government the with a coup d’etat, killing 4 politicians including the first minister and the northerner leader Ahmadu Bello. The ethnicity of the putschist command led the Hausa-Fulani rulers to interpret the coup d’état as a rebellion of the Igbos to the North domination and a desire to weaken the northerner leaders. A new Igbo head of state, Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi, took the official power, but a revenge coup from the north did not take long to happen and between June and July of the same year, starting with the killing of the general Ironsi, followed by a huge serie of massacres of the Igbos living in the north, the northerners officials and militaries took the power again, putting in charge the lieutenant colonel Yakubu Gowon as the new head of state. The pogroms and the killings against the Igbos continued for months and they have

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45 Emiliani, Petrolio, forze armate e democrazia; Maier, This house has fallen; Omagu, Ethnic nationalism and identity politics.
46 Falola and Ezekwem, Writing the Nigeria-Biafra war, p. 25.
47 Emiliani, Petrolio, forze armate e democrazia, 43.
48 Falola and Ezekwem, Writing the Nigeria-Biafra war, p. 28.
49 Heerten and Moses, The Nigeria-Biafra war, p. 175; Omaka, Conquering the Home Front.
50 Emiliani, Petrolio, forze armate e democrazia, p. 75.
51 Maier, This house has fallen, p. 13.
52 Omagu, Ethnic nationalism and identity politics, p. 191.
been interpreted by them as deliberate acts of genocide, and this interpretation will be one of the key events to understand the developing of the war and the strategy of Biafra. Gowon took the power in all the country except for the Eastern Region, that was indeed the motherland of many Igbos, which was still controlled by the military governor general Chukwuuwmeka Odumegwu Ojukwu⁵³.

In this context, many Igbos who lived in the north started to leave going back to the Eastern region, urged by Ojukwu himself too. As stated by Emiliani, it is assumed that the deaths of both northerners and Igbos between May and September 1966 were more than 80,000⁵⁴. The increased killings of the Igbos and the failure of Gowon to honor the agreements with Ojukwu reached at a series of conciliatory meetings in Aburi, Ghana, led the Eastern region to declare its independence from the federal government of Nigeria on the 30 of May 1967, date of birth of the secessionist Republic of Biafra, led by Ojukwu⁵⁵. The flag of the secessionist country depicted a rising sun which symbolizes the hope of Biafrans to overcome adversary and shine⁵⁶ and which is also the symbol most utilized today by Igbo nationalist association and movements.

The claim of Ojukwu and the Igbos was that a genocide perpetrated at the expense of the Igbos was being carried on by the government, and the creation of a new nation, Biafra, was the only way the had to continue to leave peacefully. But as Maier underlights, although ethnic politics provided the excuse for the conflict, the vast oil reserves of the Niger Delta were the ultimate “booty” and will be the central element in the civil war⁵⁷. Moreover, the support of Nigeria from Western powers, especially the UK, which was interested in maintaining an international order and especially in not losing its oil supply and its credibility, was fundamental in the course of the events and to the disadvantage of Biafra. Another element that was against the Biafrans was that a large part of the Eastern Nigerian intelligentsia, the elite was against secession and did not support Ojukwu’s plan⁵⁸. This meant that the

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⁵⁴ Emiliani, *Petrolio, forze armate e democrazia*, p. 84.
⁵⁷ Maier, *This house has fallen*, p. 13.
⁵⁸ Omaka, *Conquering the Home Front*, p. 557.
Eastern Region was not completely unified and compact; and this would have been essential since the minority groups from Niger Delta that Biafra embedded in the conflict did not lower their voices and were turned against the Igbos from both Nigeria and UK.

The decree emanated by Gowon in 1967, which divided Nigeria from 4 regions of influence into 12 states and created three fully separate states from the former Eastern region, aimed at empowering the Niger Delta minorities within this area against the Igbos, isolating them. This was a strategy of the Nigerian government, which claimed that «the creation of Biafra would simply replicate Eastern Nigeria's minority problem in a new guise, leading to an Igbo-dominated state in which the rights of five millions Efiks, Ibibios, Ekois and Ijaws would be denied».

Anyway, after only a successful offensive by the Biafran army, the Nigerian government, supported by the principal Western powers, prevailed for the rest of the conflict and from 1968, with the capture of Port Harcourt, the main city of the Rivers State and principal access to the sea, the Biafran decline was every day more visible. In particular, the federal government actuated a real blockade of the Biafran land from the rest of the world, isolating it and preventing the Igbos from receiving any kind of supplies, from weapons to daily food stocks, causing a forced and terrible starvation. The secessionist state was turned into a landlocked enclave and, after a war that lasted three years fighting in the name of self-determination, Ojukwu and Biafra surrendered without any other chance on 15 January 1970. According to Falola and Ezekwem, the decision of the Biafran ruling class to fight until the very end was fateful for the destiny of Biafra, and has received many critiques for being one of the reasons the starvation has prolonged so much causing a terrible humanitarian disaster.

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59 Falola and Ezekwem, Writing the Nigeria-Biafra war, p. 54.
61 Heerten and Moses, The Nigeria-Biafra War, p. 175.
62 Falola and Ezekwem, Writing the Nigeria-Biafra war, p. 263.
2.2 Official and counter narrative in the Biafran civil war: literary accounts

After the end of the civil war in 1970, the official Nigerian government has adopted a certain policy of silence and promoted a biased memory of the Biafran conflict; in other words, the political use of the civil war memory has not been totally fair and objective with regard to what the Biafran population went through. For example, the event is still a taboo in the schools’ programs, the government did not recognize the term Biafra and kept calling the conflict “the war for the national unity of Nigeria”, instead of giving credits to the secession struggle of the Biafrans. Therefore the mainstream narrative has not given to Biafrans and all the “survivors” the right amount of narration and space, not observing the great complexity of the war. It is important to note that it is always correct to talk about a Biafran conflict and not just an Igbo conflict because, even if Igbo were the principal supporters of secession and the ones who were principally involved in the political and civilian struggle, many other ethnic minority groups were involved. These have been manipulated and exploited both by the federal government and the Igbo leaders, in order to win their support and not lose the crucial oil-rich lands.

My argument in this chapter is that, however, the perpetuation of only one side of the story by the Nigerian government has produced a kind of reverse effect on the counter-narrative by the Igbo people themselves throughout the years. The narration, the writing and the international communication of the conflict with a pitiful tone and in a way which always blames the past, somehow showed the Igbos just as victims of a genocide, not helping them to fortify their identity in a proactive and regenerative way. In fact from the genocide theory to the contemporary narrative they promoted, starting from Chinua Achebe, it seems that it is difficult for them to tell a different kind of story from that of victims doomed to a destiny of marginalization. This kind of narration and stereotyping was also promoted and facilitated by the press coverage and the involvement of humanitarian organizations

63 Ibid., p. 272.
64 Achebe, There Was a Country.
that depicted just the image of a suffering and starving Biafra. In claiming this, I do not intend to question the terrible policy of starvation and the suffering of Biafrans civilians, but to make reflect on the power and at the same time the danger of a single story which portrays just one “living in the past” identity. However, contemporary artists such as Adichie herself and the satiric writer Chukwuemeka Ike, author of the acclaimed *Sunset at Dawn* (1976), are important because they try to untie and disrupt this monolithic and single-side narrative, in favour of a proactive awareness of the meaning of the war and its political interests. Above all, they promote a more inclusive view in respect of the many ethnic minorities groups involved in the conflict as much as the Igbos.

In fact, in my opinion, the untold story of the Niger Delta local populations and the exploitation of their lands were not given the same amount of media coverage at least until the huge media case of the death of Ken Saro-Wiwa. For this reason, this story deserves a more complex and precise analysis, since these populations were neglected in the civil war both by Nigeria and Biafra, and their lands were wildly exploited by multinational oil companies during the following three decades until today. The activist Saro-Wiwa was also observing and denouncing in his writings that only one side of the story has been told.

Therefore, the main objective of this chapter is to show how a certain kind of politics of memory has been carried on throughout the consistent Biafran literature and narration of the conflict, opposed to the one-sided official narrative. As Heerten and Moses point out, «There is a considerable semantic and political difference between labelling the conflict as an insurgency, as the FMG (Federal Military Government) initially did, as a civil war or as genocide». The Nigerian government continued to deny the reality and acted trying to delete and forget the past, without a proper healing, also in the following decades after the end of the war. The government adopted a real hegemonic narrative which is reflected on more levels and in the

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many ways of remembering the war. For example, in regard to the teaching of the war, the most visible policies of forgetfulness is that the war is not listed in the national curriculum in Nigerian universities and that Nigerian history textbooks ignore the crucial ethnic questions connected to the war. In regard to the literature instead, a monumental and biased attempt of reconstructing the war is the work The Nigerian Civil War and Its Aftermath published in 2001 in Ibadan by a group of historians and politicians including the former head of state Gowon, who keeps claiming that the conflict was the war for the national unity of Nigeria. Moreover, regarding the issue of the re-integration of Igbo and South-eastern people during the post-war period, there is a huge difference of points of view. Even if there are some claims of an alleged well re-integration of the group in the North, the majority of accounts, including interviews with the population and the claims of the secessionist movements, show that in spite of “the three Rs” Gowon’s politics (Rehabilitation, Reconstruction and Reconciliation), the way for an aware and total re-integration is, if not impossible, still far away.

The language utilized by the official government to describe the rebel Biafrans was similar to the one they use nowadays to refer to the secessionist protest movements members, labelled as terrorists and criminals who are jeopardizing the unity of Nigeria. In fact, as argued by Otuonye, in the Nigerian context we can observe the ways in which language is used as a tool to disregard the dialogic space and maintain power and control. Moreover, the Nigerian government continues to promote the language and the rhetoric of “security” for the unity of the country, as a mean to justify both the silence on the atrocities of the war and the violence against the pro-Biafrans movements.

The effect of the politics of memory manipulated by the official government has been an enormous amount of counter narrative and literary works produced by

68 Onuoha, Contemporary Igbo Nationalism and the Crisis of Self-Determination in the Nigerian Public Sphere, p. 4.
69 Ibid., p. 10.
70 Ibid., p. 8.
71 Anugwom, From Biafra to the Niger Delta conflict, p. 130.
pro-Biafrans and mostly Igbo writers, activists and intellectuals who felt the need to recount their own story, in order to not forget and remember in the proper way the atrocities of the war, lived in first person or as messengers of the “next” generation. Much has been written on the war and the Igbo struggle in the form of personal accounts and memories, fiction and novels, not to mention movies, theatrical performances and popular songs. According to Amadiume and An-Na’im, many African writers have aimed to bring to the awareness of society their perceptions of the injustice of their nations, and the writers on Biafra war form an important part of this intellectual group. In describing the function of the griot, the oral historian in Western Africa, Krishnan argues also about the importance of orality and the cultural historical transmission, through which the writer and storyteller calls upon a form of social responsibility and connectivity through time in the society and in the collective memory.

However, this “war of narratives” creates the consequent problem of an overly unbalanced narrative, (keeping however in my mind that an impartial and objective voice does not exist in any kind of narrative), in which the only purpose seems to blame each other and not to explore the extreme complexity of the conflict; in other words the result is «a bifurcation of the proper history and understanding of the war». For this reason, I find it extremely important to include the voice of the third protagonists of the war, the ethnic minority groups, which in the end were the most exploited because the principal reason of the war was the control of their oil-rich lands. Their counter-narrative and their eco-critical literature is crucial in the international scene and in fight for the defense of indigenous lands and population.

The issue of the literary separatism is well explained by Falola and Ezekwem who confront two opposite accounts of the first 1966 coup: Ademoyega’s Why We Struck: The Story of the First Nigerian Coup and (1981) and Mainasara’s The Five Majors: Why They Struck (1982); the first is an accountable work that explain the

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73 Amadiume and An-na’im, The politics of memory, p. 58.
75 Falola and Ezekwem, From Biafra to the Niger Delta conflict, p. 178.
76 Ibid.
myths and the misconceptions on the coup, deconstructing the ethnic conspiracy narrative, while the second is the northern protecting response. Moreover, Ademoyega’s work raises an interesting point in showing how, even if the ethnicity of the coup’s authors was Igbo, it was mainly a military coup and the Igbo civilians were not involved or informed; in other words, their ethnicity was manipulated in order to justify a consequent Northern counter coup.

A different point of view on the civil war and the reasons of the Biafra secessionist movements is narrated in the personal accounts of Wole Soyinka and his literary works, such as You Must Set Forth At Dawn. We know that although he condemned the 1966 pogroms against the Igbos living in the North of Nigeria, he was against secession as a solution to the conflict and he totally opposed the war, condemning its immorality and injustice on every level, on both sides. At the same time, he condemned the politics of memory adopted by the Nigerian government that perpetuates an official single narrative; however, Soyinka, Amadiume and An-Na’im agree on the fact that «politics calls for selective memory» and that the past is ever completely put behind.

In regard to the literature and accounts produced by Igbo local authors and Biafra indigenes, Falola and Ezekwem argue that, since politics and almost every aspect of the Nigerian society has been ethnicized from the colonial period, it is difficult for local authors to hide these ethnic sentiments, because they cannot be completely objective in recounting the atrocities of the war. Writers such as Chinua Achebe, Buchi Emecheta, Chinelo Okparanta, Chukwuemeka Ike, Eddie Iroh and Chris Abani through their novels and personal accounts have the great merit of being keepers of the collective memory of Igbos and Biafrans and of the non-forgetting of the conflict who costed the lives of 2 million people. In their works, they narrated the war while deeply analyzing the problem of social justice in Africa and Nigeria, which is the «reckless use of power by leaders». However, they can be considered local writers,

77 Ibid., p. 170.
79 Amadiume and An-na’im, The politics of memory, p. 45.
80 Ibid., p. 53.
81 Falola and Ezekwem, From Biafra to the Niger Delta conflict, p. 200.
82 Amadiume and An-na’im, The politics of memory, p. 65.
and for this reason their accounts, though close to reality, cannot be fully objective and ethnically disengaged, with the risk of a sterile blaming of the “other”.

In this regard, Chinua Achebe’s There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra (2012) is the most controversial literary work on the conflict in the contemporary period; it deserves a more detailed analysis because it is a great example of a literary work repository, and at the same time mobilizer, of the collective memory of a group. Achebe is considered by many scholars the father of modern Anglophone African literature since 1958, year of publication of Things Fall Apart, a novel set in pre-colonial South-Eastern Nigeria and which follows the story of an Igbo man and warrior whose reality is shaken by the arrival of the first British colonialists. Msiska argues that in There was a country Achebe extends the literary testimonial function to autobiographical testimony, using his life as a site for exploring national history, being himself a witness of the conflict and personally involved, since he was a close adviser and confidant of Ojukwu, the Head of State of Biafra. The biggest critic the work has received during the years is that it seems impregnated of an excessive ethnic nationalism in favour of the Igbos, and to be an unapologetic blaming of the role of Nigerian government and Hausa and Yoruba politicians and personalities during the Biafran civil war, often avoiding more complex arguments. In fact Achebe unequivocally blames Chief Awolowo for the elimination of two millions of Biafrans through starvation, driven by his thirst for power and felt threatened by the economic and military power of the Igbos in the South before the 1966 coup; this statement has been hugely judged as bizarre, irrational and unjustified, since he does not take into account the war’s complexities and political strategies of the leaders involved.

Moreover, Falola and Ezekwem question the fact that, in the fourth parts of the book, it is only in the last that Achebe talks of a Nigerian ruling class, concentrating the focus on three other sections on ‘tribe’ and ethnicity. This argument is what

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84 Ibid., p. 402.
85 Ibid., p. 416.
86 Falola and Ezekwem, From Biafra to the Niger Delta conflict, p. 259.
87 Ibid., p. 247.
divides mostly the scholars on Achebe’s work. On the one hand, authors such as Jeyifo accuse *There was a country* to be a non-realistic apologia and a promotion of an Igbo ethno-nationalism which totally excluded the issue of class, and accuse Achebe to be a deluded propagandist and ideologue. On the other hand, different scholars such as Mpalive-Hangson and Mudimbe argue that the commitment of Achebe to the idea of Biafra transcends the concept of ethnicity and it is totally committed to the values of self-determination and social justice, aspiring to an imagined community in Nigeria. The main objective of the work seems in fact to be facing the trauma of Biafra, which could have been a viable home and national space for Igbos and other communities in South-Eastern Nigeria. However, Achebe in the recount of the defeat of Biafra is claiming the overall failure of the nationalist and federalist project in post-independence Nigeria, a project that he personally supported, retracing in the primary causes the strategic and ethnic division of the country since the British colonialism.

Achebe’s work is criticized also because it seems to be a defense of the Igbos and their “superior” moral values; Jeyifo in fact suggests that the central theme argued in the book is that «mediocrity effectively replaced meritocracy after Igbos were purged from the intellectual and professional centers of our public life in those fateful months between January and August 1966», and that Igbos were the necessary martyrs instrumentalized in order to institutionalize and justify this mediocrity. In my view, these accusations are strong and misleading, since they imply a dangerous juxtaposition of the two concepts ethnicity and class morality; Achebe’s work can be rightly criticized for not being one hundred percent objective, but in the end because it is a recount of a personal and of a community trauma neglected by the politics of memory and silence by the official government for decades. According to Mpalive-Hangson, Achebe simply felt the artistic responsibility to not forget, identifying himself in the one who, through his actions, could have

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91 Falola and Ezekwem, *Writing the Nigeria-Biafra war*, p. 254.
given relief to his people. I agree however with the critique that Achebe naively implies, in his book, a reintegration and a relief in a new Biafra for all the classes of Igbo, not paying enough attention to the tensions between Igbo leaders in the civil war, between Igbo elites and secessionist movements in the post-war period and, above all, not properly considering the multi-ethnicity of Biafra and the involvement of the ethnic minority groups from Niger Delta.

Contemporary literary works such as There Was A Country and Half Of A Yellow Sun, which I have analyzed, are demonstrations of the power of collective memory; Achebe and Adichie are proactive, direct and indirect, witnesses who foster and strengthen their personal politics of memory against that of silence by the official authorities.

It is fundamental to mention then the counter-narratives from the Niger Delta minorities involved in the Biafran civil war (1967-1970). The opinion and works on the war of authors such as Ken Saro-Wiwa, Elechi Amadi and Ukpabi Asika can already be considered a consistent body of the “minority” literature. In fact they anticipate the issue of minorities groups’ political and economic marginalization, arguing that not only the federal government but also the Biafran leaders and elites were driven by greediness for the oil in proclaiming a compact and united Biafra. In this regard, the difference between the Biafra question and the minority question is clear according to them. On the one hand, the Igbo groups asked for secession and denounced the social and economic marginalization because they wanted to be part of the political “game”, in order to get their part of the national cake. On the other hand, the rightful owners of the oil-rich lands claimed their rights to the state protesting and not asking for secession, but for a fairer share of oil revenues and in order to stop the pollution. Saro-Wiwa and Amadi were also convinced believers of “one Nigeria” and decided to align with the federal forces during the war, not accepting to be forcefully embedded in the Biafran project. The concept of

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92 Mpalive-Hangson, Imagined nations and imaginary Nigeria, p. 411.
93 Falola and Ezekwem, Writing the Nigeria-Biafra war, p. 263.
94 Ibid., p. 172.
95 Ibid., p. 173.
marginalization is therefore present in both the counter-narratives, but in order to reach different objectives.

Among Saro-Wiwa’s non-fictional works of denouncement the most representative is *Genocide in Nigeria. The Ogoni Tragedy*. In this work the author reports official letters and petitions written by himself and the responses received from companies like Shell, since the end of the civil war in 1970. In the first pages of the book, Saro-Wiwa shows how the Ogoni, his own ethnic group, had been exploited in the war also by Ojukwu’s hidden agenda, who wanted to control the Delta minorities. In regard to the oil operations, the author discusses the paradox of the civil protests, coming from “illiterate peasants” who did not have chances against an organization financially and legally strong like Shell. In fact this was the situation immediately after the end of the civil war, when the conflict was still contained and the international community along with the media still not much involved. Moreover, Saro-Wiwa accused Shell of having promoted only European and mostly British culture in Nigeria, not considering at all the multi-ethnic diversity of the country and the Ogoni culture.

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97 Ibid., p. 28.
98 Ibid., p. 56.
99 Ibid., p. 72.
3.1 Adichie’s *Half Of A Yellow Sun*: the force of collective memory

*Half of a Yellow Sun* is Adichie’s second novel, originally published in 2006, and is a fictional story set in the years prior to (early 60s) and during the Biafran civil war (1967-70). The novel follows the five principal characters’ lives that intertwine with each other before, during and after the conflict. Olanna and Kainene are two twins born in a wealthy middle-class family. The first is a foreign educated lecturer at the University in Nsukka, while the latter is involved with the family’s activities and business; Odenigbo, Olanna’s partner, is a charismatic and revolutionary university professor who strongly supports the Biafra cause; Ugwu is a young village boy, apparently naive but actually smart and proactive, who during the war is forced to become a child soldier; and finally Richard, who is romantically involved with Kainene, a white Englishman living in Nigeria because interested in African art and who is writing a novel. All the principal characters, except for Richard, are of Igbo ethnicity.

With only a few exceptions, the support for Biafra cause in the civil war is strong among the characters, and this is demonstrated by the inclusion of Biafran popular songs and a verse from the Biafran anthem. Furthermore, a strong identification in the Igbo and Biafra culture is represented, as in this passage in which Odenigbo is discussing about Pan-Africanism and colonialism in his friendly literary circle:

«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

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different as possible from his *white*. But I was Igbo before the white man came*" 101.

This strong identification with Biafra comes paradoxically even from Richard, the only white character who, however, affirms in Igbo language to be a Biafran 102. Even if the man is not taken seriously in the novel and at times he seems to be mocked too, this fact shows how powerful the idea of Biafra is, mostly on an ideological level and a feeling to belong to a specific, collective community. On the other hand, in the novel are also represented and discussed the ethnic tensions mostly between Hausa-Fulani and Igbo since the colonial period, started from the division and different British administration in the North and in the South of Nigeria 103. This illustrative passage, for example, in which a non-Igbo man mistakes Olanna for a Hausa-Fulani woman, shows the climate of suspicion and ethnic tensions during the conflict, mostly in matter of political power and the control over the state resources:

"The problem with Igbo people is that they want to control everything in this country. Everything. Why can’t they stay in the East? They own all the shops; they control the civil service, even the police” 104.

Richard’s project at the beginning of the story is to write a book about the Biafran experience, titled *The World Was Silent When We Died*, even if at the end of the novel, after the disappearance of Kainene, he leaves the writing since he feels lost and without hope. Therefore, Adichie utilizes the character of Ugwu as the indirect author of this “book in the book”, an interesting example of metanarrative: an explicit accuse towards the non-intervention and hypocrite humanitarianism of the Western powers and the indifference of the Nigerian state during the terrible starvation, which brought Biafra to their knees during the last two years of the conflict:

"He writes about starvation. Starvation was a Nigerian weapon of war. Starvation broke Biafra last as long as it did. Starvation made the

102 Ibid., p. 181.
103 Ibid., p. 115.
104 Ibid., p. 227.
people of the world take notice and sparked protests and demonstrations in London and Moscow and Czechoslovakia. Starvation made Zambia and Tanzania and Ivory Coast and Gabon recognize Biafra, starvation brought Africa into Nixon’s American campaign and made parents all over the world tell their children to eat up. [...] And starvation made the International Red Cross call Biafra its gravest emergency since the Second World War» 105.

Even if Adichie considers the weapon of starvation to be inhumane and immoral, and she admits that, because of the tragedy lived by Biafrans, they remember differently, she does not agree with Achebe’s claims against Awolowo politics and believes106. In fact, the young writer is inspired by Achebe’s works and literary activism and considers them her points of reference. However she disrupts the one-sided narrative of marginalization and self-victimization of the Igbo people in favour of a more proactive, aware and inclusive discourse, even pointing at the real cause of the war, which transcends all the ethnic discourses, that is the oil.

Anyhow, the reasons for which we can consider Adichie’s novel innovative and non-static for the collective memory of Biafrans are the role of the women and the discourse about the role and exploitation of the ethnic minority groups in Biafra107. In regard to the first point, both Olanna and Kainene, and many others Biafran women, reveal themselves strong female characters who learn to cope with the adversities brought by the war and try to make the difference in their own community, collaborating with the university women’s organizations which managed the food donations for the refugees108 and with the village women who helped and supported with clothes the soldiers109. Quite the opposite, the impressive and patriotic figure of Odenigbo, with the passing of time and during the terrible years of the food blockade, becomes every day less powerful, feeling defeated for the lost Biafran cause, as an intellectual and as a man, leaving Olanna to take charge of the

105 Ibid., p. 237.
106 Mpalive-Hangson, Imagined nations and imaginary Nigeria, p. 415.
107 Sagawa, At the center, taking charge, p. 34.
108 Adichie, Half of A Yellow Sun, p. 158.
109 Ibid., p. 185.
situation. Therefore, according to Amadiume and An-Na’im, also because of these actions we can affirm that «memories of Biafra are not expressed only in the discourse of marginalization, or in the discourse of victimhood of having been massacred, blackaded, outgunned and starved to death and defeat [...] but include what people have done for themselves as distinct from and in spite of marginalizing government policies».

Another critical point brought up by Adichie, even if not completely resolved, is the ethnic minorities' role in the conflict. In the novel she shows how the feeling of commitment to the Biafran cause was so strong to obscure and distort the Igbo hegemonic ambitions, enough to label everyone who did not fight for the cause in Biafra as a “saboteur”. These are the words that Ugwu hears from an ex Biafran fighter:

"Our town would not have fallen but for the saboteurs in our midst! [...] I was a Civil Defender. I know how many infiltrators we discovered, and all of them were Rivers people. What I am telling you is that we can no longer trust these minorities who don't speak Igbo."

This hatred between Igbo and the ethic minorities such as Efik, Ijaw, Ibibio, Ogoni and Ikwerre existed even before the colonial period, but deteriorated as the result of an intense Nigerian propaganda against Biafra. In fact, the secessionist leaders were accused of willing to create an Igbo nationalist project in which the minorities would have remained the same and even become second-class citizens without rights at all. The truth was in reality much simpler, since both the Nigerian and Biafran leaders were interested in not losing the oil-rich lands, which were in part in the Biafra region but mostly in the Niger Delta.

*Half of a Yellow Sun* has the merit of being a pro-Biafra text, which however departs from the official Biafran rhetoric, showing the fallacies of the secessionists' narrative.

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110 Amadiume and An-na’im, *The politics of memory*, p. 50.
112 Falola and Ezekwem, *Writing the Nigeria-Biafra war*, p. 265.
of national inclusion and the discordant voices in the aspiring separatist state. In fact, even if Ojukwu and the Biafran leaders were cautious about never talking only of Igbo ethnicity but insisting on an Eastern Region struggle against Nigeria they wanted the minorities for strategic purposes in order to win the war. Moreover, the minorities seemed to be praised by Igbo supporters in the positive initial phase of the war, while, when the Biafra defeat was approaching and always more evident, it was easier to blame the "saboteurs" as scapegoats and not taking their own responsibilities. Adichie in the novel indirectly expresses only once her feeling and that of many Igbos in the civil war about the ethnic tensions issue, through the character of Kainene, who states: «We are all Biafrans!». This sentence is vehemently pronounced by Olanna’s twin in a burst of rage to another woman who accuses the saboteurs to be the spies of the enemy and the cause of the Biafran defeat. In spite of the explanation of the passage by Coffey, who claims that the fact that Kainene uses violence to impose her idea could be read as the reflection of the Biafran violent behaviour in including “necessarily” the minorities in their national project, my opinion is that this sentence represents Adichie’s denounce of the inhumanity of the Biafran tragedy for all the people involved. Millions of civilian deaths transcend, in this case, the political and ethnic tensions. Exemplificative in this regard is the testimony of a man from Asaba, a town in the actual Delta state where in the October of 1967 was committed a massacre by the federal troops:

“The vandals took our town many weeks ago and they announced that all the indigenes should come out and say “One Nigeria” and they would give them rice. So people came out of hiding and said “One Nigeria” and the vandals shot them, men, women and children. Everyone”.

Adichie wants to question the discourse of the hegemonic nationalist project promoted by Igbo leaders, in favour of a more inclusive narrative. Although she does

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113 Ibid., p. 268.
114 Ibid., p. 273.
not go into depth and does not fully resolve the ethnic minorities’ question, she
raises important issues which depart from and overtune the freezed and static Igbo
narrative of marginalization, showing how the rights and desires of many ethnic
minorities were exploited in the name both of “One Nigeria” and “Independent
Biafra”.

Even though Adichie is an Igbo woman and her novel carries the collective memory
of her people, she actually does not stop on the surface of the official causes of the
war and tries to look deeper, recounting through the many characters the various
facets, often contradictory, of the event. This is why we can affirm that her novel
brings to light pro-Igbo and at the same time pro-minorities concepts and
discussions. These features therefore represent the crucial link for the comparison
with Saro-Wiwa’s novel, considered one of the most important works which
interrogates the ethnic minorities’ interpretation of their roles in the civil war

3.2 Sozaboy: Ken Saro-Wiwa and his militancy

Sozaboy is Saro-Wiwa’s first novel, originally published in 1985. The protagonist of
Sozaboy, Mene, is a young man from Dukana, a fictional town in the Delta region,
and he is probably an Ogoni like Saro-Wiwa, although in the novel the name of any
ethnic group or real city is never mentioned. However, according to Olorode there is
a clear correspondence between the description of the small community located on
the fringe of Port Harcourt (called “Pitakwa” in the novel) and the author’s homeland

The novel is set in the context of the Biafran civil war and follows Mene’s
evolution from a small-town boy to a soldier. The term “sozaboy” in fact means
“soldier boy” and comes from a mixture of Pidgin and broken English. Mene
experiences the traumas of the war and witnesses how it violently transforms him,

118 Falola and Ezekwem, Writing the Nigeria-Biafra war, p. 231.
120 Ibid., p. 172.
his family and his home\textsuperscript{121}. At the beginning of the story, Mene is recruited by the Biafran army, but later on he becomes at first a prisoner and then a soldier of the federal side. Through Mene’s story Saro-Wiwa wants to show how the Delta minorities living in the Biafra region were basically forced in a war they did not understand, and to accept the Biafran secessionist project. In fact, according to Corley et al., the author does not hide his disdain for the Biafran leaders, depicting negatively in the novel their war-mongering rhetoric\textsuperscript{122}.

Mene is the representation of an anti-hero in an anti-war novel and remains a naive boy throughout the whole story. In fact, in the beginning he does not know what he is going to fight for and he chooses to be part of the army thinking that this would help him to build the future he wants. At the end, however, he has witnessed just the atrocities and the senselessness of violence. Plus, he loses everything: when he returns to his homeland he discovers that his mum and girlfriend have been killed, and that the people of his village believe he is dead, and therefore a ghost came to haunt them\textsuperscript{123}.

The novel is full of questions and naive doubts of the protagonist, who speaks with himself wondering why they are fighting and who is the enemy (the federal government), like in this passage:

«But every time he will be calling that enemy. I begin to fear this Mr. Enemy you know. [...] Even the Chief Commander General is fearing this man. Why? Even self, why all of us will join hand to kill him. Does he have many heads? What is wrong with him? Why does everybody want to kill him? And why they will train plenty people to kill him? »\textsuperscript{124}.

During a gunfight, an injured Mene becomes a prisoner of the enemy, the federal side, but is also taken under their care, healed and then recruited as a soldier for the


\textsuperscript{123} Perera-Rajasingham, “Work Is War”, p. 4.

\textsuperscript{124} Saro-Wiwa, Sozaboy, p. 78.
Nigerian army. The treatment received makes Mene immediately wondering why he was taught to disdain and fear the enemy, showing again the naivety of his actions:

«Immediately I wear that uniform I know that I am not prisoner of war. [...] They also gave me one short thick rifle like this. Very fine rifle. I like it. [...] And na these people they are calling “enemy” all the time. How enemy will give me chop (=food), chook me medicine till I well, give me motor to drive, without I no get licence, give me fine fine uniform and then very fantastic rifle. So I am a fool all this time that I am wanting to kill this enemy! God of Mercy!»125

Saro-Wiwa wants also to show how the naive actions of men like Mene, convinced to fight for the good of their people, actually end up protecting salt and oil trading practices that will be harmful to them and will cause the deterioration of their lands after the Biafran civil war. In fact Perera-Rajasingham’s126 the principal argument is that the novel is a prequel to the neoliberalism period. The civil war started the necessary transformations for the consolidation of neoliberal capitalism127, through highly exploitative practices such as oil extraction and the consequent deprivation of political and environmental rights for the ethnic minority groups’ living in the Niger Delta.

In *Sozaboy* the logic of oil and the consequent exploitation are therefore present, although not openly discussed by the author. In fact according to Nicholls the Biafran official claim was the secession from the federation, but it was obvious that the concern for Biafra, Nigeria, and the Western powers indirectly involved, such as the UK and US, was the control of the Niger Delta and its geopolitical importance128. In the novel, some historical facts are voluntarily omitted by Saro-Wiwa, in order to not distract the reader from the senselessness of every act of war that Mene experiences. In fact some passages in the book are just witnessed and non-questioned by the naive protagonist, but they have a meaning in the Biafran

125 Ibid., p. 126.
127 Ibid.
and Nigerian strategies. For example, Nicholls argues that the high salt prices in Dukana resulted from the federal forces’ imposition of a naval blockade on Biafra\textsuperscript{129}. Furthermore the expropriation of civilian property in Dukana, witnessed by Mene when he returns home, is caused by the failure of Biafra to retain control of oil exportation\textsuperscript{130}.

The logic of oil is therefore fundamental in \textit{Sozaboy}. The novel wants to be a strong denounce of the condition of the minorities since the war, and it does this even through its language. The complete title of the novel is actually \textit{Sozaboy: A Novel in Rotten English}. Rotten English has been defined as a mixture of all types of English (Pidgin, broken and idiomatic English) and is chosen by Saro-Wiwa because it represents the situation of mediocre education and limited opportunities in which the protagonist lives\textsuperscript{131}. Moreover this chaotic language fully reflects the climate of tension and senseless violence that has characterized all the period of the war, especially for the lower-classes and the ethnic minorities.

Mene’s last words in the novel shows his final and total disillusionment on the war:

«And I was thinking how I was prouding before to go to soza and call myself Sozaboy. But now if anybody say anything about war or even fight, I will just run and run and run and run and run. Believe me yours sincerely«\textsuperscript{132}.

Saro-Wiwa wants to keep alive the memory of the conflict through this novel for a different reason from the one of pro-Biafran authors. He shows the other side of the conflict, putting aside the discourses on the ethnic struggle between Igbo and Hausa leaders. The novelist promotes and represents his own counter-memory and that of the minorities. Therefore the political use of memory is evident in his novel, because he wants to recount the atrocities that many groups of people were forced to suffer in the name of a war that they really never understood and from which they did not

\begin{flushright}
129 Ibid., p. 68. \\
130 Ibid. \\
131 Olorode, \textit{Ken Saro-Wiwa and the crises of the Nigerian state}, p. 172. \\
\end{flushright}
benefit, just as the protagonist Mene experienced\textsuperscript{133}. The Niger Delta minorities’ collective memory is strongly influenced and strengthened by this work, just as Saro-Wiwa today remains the symbol of the minorities’ struggle in Nigeria.

**Chapter 4: Conclusion**

**5.2 Adichie and Saro-Wiwa: the key of continuity**

Although in a multiethnic country like Nigeria it is necessary a more inclusive discourse on resource distribution and political rights at a national level, this does not exclude the importance of minority groups’ narratives and marginalization issues. This importance is strictly connected to the need to not forget tragic events that marked the country’s history, but also in order to take promptly significant steps in the nation-building process. The literary accounts from minority groups’ perspective are fundamental, because their fights allow us to understand the principal socio-political problems affecting the country.

Chapter Three was useful in my thesis to look more deeply into this issue and analyze the two case studies, in order to disseminate the meaning of collective memory and the political use of memory which was the objective of my work. Through the analysis of the fictional novel *Half of A Yellow Sun* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie I have argued the relevance of the Biafran civil war in Nigerian history. The account of this contemporary author, a Nigerian woman who has never witnessed the atrocities of the war, is crucial because it demonstrates the force of collective memory and it reflects the present-day perception of many Biafrans and Nigerian-American diasporic communities. In fact, many Igbos and Biafrans continue to perceive themselves today as second-class citizens, excluded by the political game

\textsuperscript{133} Falola and Ezekwem, *Writing the Nigeria-Biafra war*, p. 231.
of the majority ruling ethnic groups\textsuperscript{134}. Moreover, literary accounts from the Biafran perspective show that a specific and alternative politics of memory has been carried out against the official narrative of the state, who attempted to minimize the causes and the results of the war.

Marginalization and exploitation are the principal issues denounced also by Ken Saro-Wiwa’s \textit{Sozaboy}. The “minority question” is more relevant in the present Nigerian situation, in terms of security and environmental issues. This is because the conflict took a violent turn in the last twenty years at the hands of militant organizations, unlike the Biafran separatist movements’ pacific protests. These violent uprisings threaten the geopolitical stability of the entire West Africa region. Saro-Wiwa already denounced through the novel in 1985, when it was published for the first time, the strategic importance of oil, cause of the civil war and the consequent Niger Delta conflict. His literary account and political activism seem to be more in line with a united Nigeria project and his activism strongly highlights the main problem of the country, namely the minority groups’ social and political marginalization.

The geographical proximity of Biafra and Niger Delta, which is home to many minor ethnic groups, and their groups’ common discourses on marginalization and exploitation by the majority ruling ethnic groups are real potential dangers. The national question cannot be addressed without first resolving the relevant and complementary challenge of the “minority question”. Literary accounts from contemporary authors such as Adichie and Saro-Wiwa prove the importance of collective memory and counter-narratives which include the struggles of minorities. The act of remembering is not an obstacle to the nation-building process, but it raises the awareness for future actions.

Moreover, I think Nigeria deserves to be studied not only regarding the African scene but at an international level. In fact, the country has a crucial place in the oil market and its prospering of cultural, social and artistic activities are known all around the world. Furthermore, its role is critical for being one of the first countries

\textsuperscript{134} Ibid., p. 265.
in which separatist tensions and uprisings exploded in post-independence Africa, which reflect the consequences of decades of colonialism and ethnicization of political struggle. Many other African countries, though in a different way, show signs of fracture like Nigeria, and the media coverage and the Biafran fictional narrative could be the leading example.

Finally, in my research I have demonstrated, through the comparison between the two fictional novels, that it is possible to trace a strong continuity between the two works and the authors. The time lapse between Saro-Wiwa’s *Sozaboy* and Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun* shows us that the unsolved in the past remains in the present. The very different background of the two authors does not prevent them from understanding and narrating the real untold struggle of the Biafran civil war, which remains one of the principal challenges in Nigeria nowadays too. The key of continuity in the two novels is the fact that both authors strongly imply the concepts of collective memory and that of the political use of this memory. Although they are not on the same level of political discourse, they utilize these concepts to explore the complexities of the war and to represent the awakening of the minorities’ memory.

However, the present thesis is limited by the exclusion of other novels set in the same historical event. The focus on two cases studies helps to narrow down my argument, but a wider selection could highlight other features, narrations and perspectives about the war. Therefore, I hope my thesis can provide a starting point for further research in order to deepen the comparative analysis research on this field, for example taking into account two or more case studies from authors from the same period and considering different frames from that of collective memory and the political use of memory.
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**Sitography**


[https://alchetron.com/Biafra](https://alchetron.com/Biafra)