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# Biafra as Heritage and Symbol: Adichie, Mbachu, and Iweala

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## ABSTRACT

Eddie Iroh made the observation that writers of his generation, who had lived through the Biafran conflict, were too close to the suffering to write the definitive accounts of the war, and that the task would fall to later generations. This essay looks at three later accounts—Dulue Mbachu's *War Games* (2005), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), and Uzodinma Iweala's *Beast of No Nation* (2005)—to assess the war's impact on Nigerian cultural expression in the twenty-first century. As the eldest of the three writers, Mbachu lingers more on the war itself than do the other two, but far less than its contemporaries like Achebe. Adichie portray the war as a backdrop for interpersonal ethical questions, and Iweala, as an unnamed conflict that stands in the place of all such juggernauts against the poor, and especially these days against child soldiers.

Darkness descended on him, and when it lifted he knew that he would never see Kainene again and that his life would always be like a candlelit room; he would see things only in shadow, only in half glimpses. (Adichie 430)

This is a fact—and worries me—if you see too much death, then death begins to lose some of its reverence, or whatever it is. ("Chinua" 35)<sup>1</sup>

**H**eraclitus wrote that "a man's character is his fate" (*On the Universe*), but how is one to know what that character is if one is still a child? Following on Heraclitus, Georg Lukács writes that "situations arise in which a man

is confronted with a choice; and in the act of choice a man's character may reveal itself in a light that surprises even himself" (22). But how is a child to choose, if the options are to shoot one's friend, or be shot by one's commander? "To believe," writes Lukács, "means that a man consciously assumes an irrational attitude toward his own self—Let's be clear about it: there is not rational tragedy, because all heroism is irrational" (Kadarkay 203). But how can one believe in a cause that one cannot comprehend, that is irrelevant to one's complete lack of agency in the choice of one's fate? What prospects are there for an "authentic subject" when the context for his or her "creation" is irrational, premature, violent, homicidal? These questions intend to weave a philosophical net in which the following discussion is suspended, since in doing so they foreground the central aporia of the child too quickly coming of age in a time of war.

The Federation of Nigeria gained its independence on October 1, 1960, and two years later its constitution was adopted and it was admitted to the Commonwealth. Such marks of stability papered over essential disparities in this most populous of African countries: 140 million people; more than 250 ethnic groups (most prominently: Hausa and Fulani, Yoruba, Ibo, Ijaw, Kanuri, Ibibio, and Tiv; religious diversity (50% Muslim, 40% Christian, 10% of indigenous faiths). In the Biafran secession these counternational forces broke through the cardboard scenery. As Basil Davidson pointedly puts it, the "nation" that follows colonialism is usually not much of a gift; throughout Africa, in fact, it has been more akin to "the black man's burden," a problematic assemblage of peoples who frequently enough have little more in common than proximity. Reflecting on this irony, Imre Szeman notes that "the central insight into the phenomenon of the nation that is shared by all of the recent critical writing on the subject has been that all nations must be seen as essentially arbitrary configurations of culture and power, which the phenomenon of nationalism tries to obscure and make timeless and natural" (117). And within the notion of nationalism, the injustices of pitting one ethnic group against another that became a central *modus operandi* of colonial government, in subsequent years continue to undermine the chances for stability and healing in a newly colonializing world. South Africa's controversial Truth and Reconciliation Commission is one way of taking the decision to move beyond the complex, rhizomatic context of guilt and recrimination that otherwise would threaten to mire subsequent generations in the earlier history of injustice. In the Nigerian context, no similar forum has been found to refashion a nation after the horrors, self-inflicted and nurtured from abroad, that tore the country apart so soon after supposed independence. Contemporary fiction, though, suggests that time, and art, may by default have become the only effective means to digest the poison of the past, and to slowly heal from within the damage that has been done.

Just seven years after the country's nominal independence, the Nigerian Civil War extended from July 6, 1967, to January 13, 1970; the rest of the world watched it unfold, as it watched Darfur, Rwanda, and other such conflicts. Only Tanzania, Zambia, Gabon, South Africa, and the Ivory Coast recognized Biafra as a new state; by the end of the war, over three million Ibos had fled to the east, and thereby bolstered ethnic division of the country. Up to the same number died, either from the fighting itself or from starvation and disease. The details of the struggle, however, are not the focus of this essay. Today's Nigeria is a young country in several striking ways, and the most telling is the age of its people: well over half are less

than thirty; an amazing forty-four percent are under fifteen years of age. The Biafran War ended thirty-seven years ago and so was not experienced by most living Nigerians; indeed, for many Nigerians it figures much as “Vietnam” does for most Americans: as a symbol of a bad time that our elders went through; a wound that disfigures our self-reflection.

It was not always this way. Some of those closest to the Biafran fighting wrote scathingly and with immediacy, naming names and particular places as if the writers were reporters seeking to draw the world’s attention to an ongoing injustice that had to be attended to and stopped *now*. For them, this was no symbol: it was bloodletting and starvation that was either ongoing, or still vivid in the mind’s eye. Thus, Chinua Achebe stresses the need for countervailing *action*: “[I]t does not take long,” he writes, “—a few seconds—and 120 people are charred to ashes, charred black, and perhaps 20 buildings wrecked, and this is a very real thing. [. . .] Suddenly you realize that the only valid basis for existence is one that gives security to you and your people. It is as simple as that” (“Chinua” 31). “You and your people” resonates now in ways that may not be as compelling as they clearly were when Achebe’s coterie was writing, and the disruptive potential of that ethnic memory is no doubt one reason that the nation’s citizens prefer not to stir up those memories. On the one hand, he embodies the sense of betrayal that spread throughout an entire generation of Ibos:

Well, it’s very simple—between May and September 1966 there were massacres in Northern Nigeria, and not only in the North, but also in the West and Lagos. People were hounded out of their homes, as I was from my home in Lagos and we returned to the East. We expected to hear something from the intellectuals, from our friends. Rather, what we heard was “Oh they had it coming to them” or something like that. (31)

On the other hand, he gives early evidence of the sense of belonging and pride that came from moving to Biafra and identifying oneself with “one’s people.” “I realized suddenly,” he writes, “that I had not been living in my home; I had been living in a strange place. The most vital feeling of Biafrans now [that is, in 1968] is that they are at home [. . .] and you can see this in the effort that the people are putting into the war” (32).<sup>2</sup> For the early Achebe, here is Nigeria, and there is Biafra, and he simply finds Nigeria “untenable” (37).

Achebe’s admiration for the energy that his compatriots were putting into their war effort echoes through the poetry written at the time, as well as the oral poetry which, in Afam Ebeogu’s words, “utilized all the language’s phonological, syntactic, semantic, and rhetorical resources to evoke a spirit of patriotic commitment” (36). Most of the written poetry came from Igbos associated with the University of Nigeria at Nsukka, “a hotbed of intellectual activism that not only fueled the Biafran resistance, but also lifted it from the banality of mundane politics and endowed it with a depth of philosophy and a diplomatic flamboyance that drew the attention of a global audience to the Nigerian Civil War” (39). Dance was a central image in these poems, reflecting the transient nature of life. As the war continued, this energy waned and the oral poetry “began to reflect the harsh realities of widespread suffering and destruction” (Ebeogu 48).

Craig W. McLuckie, writing in 2001, focuses on memoirs written about the war, singling out three as particularly noteworthy: Elechi Amadi’s *Sunset in Biafra*

(1973), Wole Soyinka's *The Man Died* (1979), and Ken Saro-Wiwa's *On a Darkling Plain: An Account of the Nigerian Civil War* (1989).<sup>3</sup> Willfried F. Feuser examines fiction written during and soon after the war, singling out Achebe's "The Madman" (1971), Omotoso's *The Combat* (1972), Soyinka's *Season of Anomy* (1973), Aniebo's *The Anonymity of Sacrifice* (1974), and Okpewho's *The Last Duty* (1976) as having the highest literary quality. Writing in 1986, Feuser concludes that there had still not been enough time after the war to produce the sort of writing that would have sufficient emotional distance to turn suffering and commitment into art. As he puts it, "[I]t will probably take another generation to come to terms fully with the past, be it politically or artistically" (150). Here he echoes Eddie Iroh, in his early twenties during the war, who had said of his generation of writers that "we express sentiments now because we remember it so closely, but I believe the greater work about the war is yet to come—an unbiased, total assessment of the whole tragedy—and it will be necessary" (Feuser 150).

Almost forty years have passed since Iroh looked into the future, and we may gauge his prescience by surveying a few recent war-themed novels: Dulue Mbachu's *War Games* (2005), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Orange Prize-winning *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), and Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation* (2005). Mbachu (forty-five years of age) is of Ben Okri's generation; he was born in Nigeria in 1961, where he has worked as a journalist. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (twenty-nine years of age) was born in 1977 in Nsukka, where her father was Vice-Chancellor of the University. She moved to the United States in 1996. Uzodinma Iweala (twenty-four years of age) was born in 1982 and is the son of Ngozi Okonjo, who was until recently the Nigerian minister of finance, and then foreign minister; he recently graduated from Harvard and spends part time in Washington, DC, and part time in Lagos. Though the three books were published at roughly the same time, Mbachu's seems closer in style and focus to those of an earlier generation, and given his age and his work in Nigeria, this is not a surprise.

*War Games* tells the story of Basil Chekwubechukwu Odukwe ("Cheche") who begins life in a Roman Catholic household in Jos, in northern Nigeria, the son of a rich landlord. Things spiral quickly downward as the war comes on and Cheche's family moves first to Amafor, his grandfather's village, then to Umuahia, and back again to Amafor. The five-year-old boy (he is ten by story's end) is reminiscent of Rushdie's "midnight's children," telling the reader, "I was born at three o'clock on the morning of December 8, 1960, three months after the birth of our country, Nigeria" (Mbachu 10). But it only takes about five pages before a less national sense of self emerges because of the tensions he sees in the adults around him: "I now realized," he writes, "that I was an Igbo and wondered what I had done to deserve such hatred" (17).

This attempt to see things through a child's eyes has its limitations: Mbachu often makes the choice of dismissing aesthetic consistency in favor of didacticism, offering through the child-narrator information about Gowon, Aguiyi-Ironsi, and the others, information that a five-year-old would certainly never have paid attention to. This is the mark of a novelist still tied to the specifics of an historical war, who wishes to find a fresh approach but who feels honor-bound to be truthful to what actually took place (e.g., "the word 'pogrom' [. . .] was suddenly on everyone's lips" [29]). Without belaboring the point, one must nonetheless note that Mbachu's aesthetic decision in favor of a child's perspective makes outright

realism difficult. Would a five-year-old really observe the following: "Another man, seeing his pregnant wife being disemboweled, rushed out to save her, only to meet the same fate" (30); "We found that Benson, Papa's head apprentice, was no more. He had been blown to pieces and was only identified by the stump of an ankle still stuck in one of his shoes" (38). The reader sees it, is suitably horrified at the viciousness of this war, but cannot imagine a five-year-old not *lingering* over something so mesmerizingly grotesque. Instead, the child takes note of the event in one sentence, and then quickly moves on. The narrator also seems young to make the sarcastic observation that "even relatives betrayed one another for reasons that had nothing to do with the war effort, and chuckled with pleasure as they watched their victims being marched away to fight in what everyone now knew to be a suicidal war" (89). This is countered a few pages later by the child's didactic "memory" that he "was particularly touched by the story of Joseph and how his brothers sold him into slavery in Egypt" (95). And, too, at least a third of the book is devoted to Cheche's decision, in the face of the transience of the lives around him, to "immerse [him]self in the life of the place" (39): he plays with friends, revels in various ceremonies, etc., but it must also be said that these are, frankly, less interesting than the rest of the book. In fact, since the book is so clearly about the Biafran War, they are annoying.

On the other hand, there are clear benefits in the choice of a child-narrator. First among them is the child's unconsciously ironic observation that "[he] didn't need any telling to realize that [he] was older than Biafra" (34). The wide-eyed observation by an innocent provides Mbachu occasion to ironize history, having the child note that the adults around him welcomed war "as if it was some big sporting event" (33). More significant are the child's fresh observations of the suffering around him. About kwashiorkor, for example, Cheche remarks that "despite the seriousness of the situation, I must confess that we children who didn't have [it] somehow found it amusing. It was amazing how human beings would always find a reason to laugh under any circumstances" (108); so, too, his nonchalant description of the hunting of rats and lizards for food, which to a child was just good fun. The most refreshing characterization in the novel is Uncle Emeka, who, along with his friends Moses, Amanchi, Anselm, and Duke-the-Thief, does everything he possibly can to avoid being dragooned into the Biafran army. Through the child's eyes this seems at least as acceptable as the enthusiasm that the child was amazed to see in the eyes of the adults intent on gaining Biafran independence. There seems approbation when Emeka observes that "corruption is now a worse enemy than the federal forces" (93).

Cheche's father is a devout Catholic, and the boy himself considers becoming a priest. He joins his father at Mass principally to get back some semblance of the days before the war, but he gradually becomes as sarcastic about religion as he already had about government: "I had assumed that truth and justice were the cardinal principles guiding activities at the Mission but I was now learning that the cardinal principles were obedience and discipline" (187). He stands up for truth later in the book, recognizing that he "could make headway in life by trusting in [him]self" (199). In what may be a conscious tipping of the hat towards Chinua Achebe, Mbachu has his hero come to this realization after the boy's mother tells him the story of the tortoise at the feast of heaven, much like the story that plays a central thematic role in *Things Fall Apart*. Mbachu's *War Games*, then, uses the



Biafran War principally as a microcosm for the ongoing complexities of Nigeria itself, and the solution his novel offers is pretty straightforward: whatever the insanity around you, trust in yourself and, as Voltaire's *Candide* would have it, tend to your own garden.

Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* follows her very successful *Purple Hibiscus*, which begins with an explicit homage to Achebe ("Things started to fall apart at home when my brother, Jaja, did not go to communion and Papa flung his heavy missal across the room and broke the figurines on the étagère"). She calls Achebe "the most important writer for [her]" (Adebanwi 1). If Roman Catholicism plays an ambiguous role in Mbachú's novel, it comes across more favorably in Adichie's books. She bristles a bit when an interviewer identifies her as a "secular" Catholic. "I'm not sure what secular Catholic means," she responds:

I AM Catholic. It is an identity that, although I didn't have much of a choice in, I have since taken ownership of. I am very much a Vatican II enthusiast, and think that the Church should make some more changes on its stance on a number of issues. Still, there is much I admire and love in the church, the rich rituals, the traditions, the commitment that some orders have to social justice and scholarship as well as the sort of outward-looking faith that holds to some of [sic] vision of a fairer world. (Adebanwi 3)

On the other hand, she is quite critical of the misuse of religion, noting that "religion in Nigeria has become insular, self-indulgent, self-absorbed, self-congratulatory. Churches spring up day after day while corruption thrives as much as ever and God becomes the watchman standing behind you while you seek your self-interest at all cost" (2).

The condemnation of a religion that encourages an "insular, self-indulgent, self-absorbed, self-congratulatory" congregation suggests the impetus behind Adichie's insistent focus on moral choices in her characters. Much like Mbachú's *War Games*, one characteristic of *Half of a Yellow Sun* that immediately strikes the reader is the strong light that shines on the book's principal players, rather than on the politics and strategies that shaped the war. Recalling the Lukácsian observations that began this essay, one might say that Adichie allows the emerging context to incubate and to "birth" the politics of her characters. This works on two social levels, suggesting that the actual agency available to individuals may be sharply curtailed by one's place in society. Among the impoverished in Adichie's world is the young boy, Ugwu, who is sent by his mother to work as houseboy for Odenigbo, the upper class professor who gradually displays a strong advocacy of Biafran secession. Ugwu is abducted into forced service with the army (twice, in fact), but what he is actually called upon to do there is only mildly hinted at. Other characters from Ugwu's class include Jomo, Odenigbo's gardener; Ugwu's sister, Anulika, who late in the book is raped by Nigerian soldiers; and Harrison, a houseboy who is ridiculed throughout the novel as having taken on the ways of the whites, proud that he can prepare (European) foods that Nigerians would never eat. Professor Odenigbo develops a relationship with Olanna, the beautiful daughter of Chief Ozobia. Ozobia's other daughter, Kainene, is less physically attractive but wiser to the ways of the world; she develops a relationship with the white writer, Richard, who is becoming rapidly estranged from his wife Susan.

Adichie does a masterly job of orchestrating these various lives and showing their interconnectedness during the mounting violence. Kainene is of particular interest. Accustomed to having others lavish their attention on her sister, she nonetheless seems to deal with life with her eyes more clearly focused than does Olanna. This makes it all the more surprising when at story's end she has apparently made the mistake of crossing enemy lines to acquire goods for the Red Cross, where she disappears. An earlier boyfriend, Major Madu Madu, does little to save her. Her current lover, Richard, plays a highly symbolic role for Adichie: as white chronicler of the war, he gradually finds himself paralyzed for words; in his place, *Ugwu* rises up as the historian far more suited to the task. (The "ghost" of Achebe might be seen passing through the book, with Adichie making an unspoken allusion to the conclusion of *Things Fall Apart*, where Okonkwo's failed heroic life is about to be neatly summarized in "a reasonable paragraph" of the white District Commissioner's proposed book, *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*.) Richard had proposed to write a book entitled *The World Was Silent When We Died*, but very late in Adichie's novel, in a conversation with *Ugwu*, "Mr. Richard" tells him that he has put off writing the book: "'The war isn't my story to tell, really.' *Ugwu* nodded. He had never thought that it was. [ . . . ] *Ugwu* took the sheets of paper from Mr. Richard and, as he turned to make Baby's dinner, he sang under his breath" (Adichie 425). A couple of pages later, in the book's closing sentence (and headed as section 8, The Book: The World Was Silent When We Died) is simply "*Ugwu* writes his dedication last: For Master, my good man" (433).

In a novel that some might criticize as too heavily laden with love stories and with comparatively little gore, Adichie here accepts the mantle that Eddie Iroh wished to pass to the younger generation by ending her book with the assertion of ownership of the war's story. The Biafra War, though a war she has not personally experienced, is her legacy, and its telling arguably her duty. "The Nigerian identity," she tells an interviewer, "is burdensome, what with the suspicion at airports and being told you can't pay with a credit card for Nigerian-related things, and the total lack of dignity we encounter at embassies and things of that sort, but I have never wished that I had a different identity" (Adebanwi 3). She makes these remarks before *Half of a Yellow Sun* has been published, but goes on to say something that might suggest why she would write such a book: "I do wish that literature can be strong enough to help. But help in what way? If literature can affect the way one person thinks, then perhaps it has helped. [ . . . ] I have always hoped for the opportunity to reach higher with each successive book" (2, 4).

When compared to earlier ones written by those who lived through the war, Adichie's novel never dwells on its horrors in any sustained way. She has more distance from the events, no doubt, but also has a different personality from other writers: "I think that my world view, on the whole," she says, "is a romanticized one, in the sense that I am constantly wishing that the world were safer, kinder, fairer, more honest" (Adebanwi 4). One might question, of course, whether the position described here is actually romantic; it may, in fact, be awfully realistic, always expecting that the world, in fact, is *not* safe, kind, fair, or honest, and requiring readers to be "affected" by her words.

If we compare *Half of a Yellow Sun* with Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation*, the content and tone are strikingly different, Iweala's much more brutal and determinedly heartbreaking. But if Mbachau and Adichie are writing something "less" than a



Biafra novel (in their comparative disinterest in the niceties of the war's politics), one might say that Iweala is writing something "more" than a Biafra novel, in the sense that he is really writing an (one might say Biafran) account of child soldiering. He begins with a quote from Fela Kuti ("This uprising will bring out the beast in us"), the Afro-beat Nigerian musician who lived with his twenty-eight wives in a self-declared state within Lagos, and who endorsed Pan-Africanism to protest the corruption of his nation's government. Despite the specificity of his own family's powerful position in present-day Nigeria, with this arresting opening reference to a weirdly talented anarchistic polygamist Iweala has written a war novel that transcends the Biafran War, and yet seems fully to embody it—as it also embodies struggles in Uganda, Burundi, Ivory Coast, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Somalia, and Sudan, as well as those in Burma, Colombia, and elsewhere, where children are, or recently have been, used as soldiers. The "no nation" of the title (hardly the "no place" of More's *Utopia*) suggests that Iweala offers the best Biafran war novel to date by raising the war above the specifics of the historical setting his family knows best, and implicitly comparing it to wars that have passed and that are ongoing, that share in common a brutalization of the young.

A great deal of recent literature from Africa focuses on children and the effects of violence upon them—one thinks of John Bul Dau's *God Grew Tired of Us: A Memoir* (2007), Alphonsion Deng's *They Poured Fire on Us from the Sky* (2005), Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Home* (2007), Ahmadou Kourouma's *Allah Is Not Obligated* (2006), Emmanuel Dongala's *Little Boys Come from the Stars* (2001) and *Johnny Mad Dog* (2005), as well as the Nigerians: Chris Abani's *Graceland* (2004), Philip Begho's *Jelly Baby* (2004), as well as Ben Okri's corpus—but rarely has their consciousness in a time of violence been more graphically rendered than in Iweala's novel.<sup>4</sup> Iweala's brief account of the abduction of a boy into some unnamed army shows the horrors he endures with a heartbreaking sense of an innocent who yearns for the life his brutally murdered parents had offered him; a future career following an education that he loved; a life that had room for love. His father, killed before his eyes, had been a schoolteacher who had passed along his love of learning. Thus, little Agu, amid the killing, recalls that "I am liking [sic] to read so much that my mother is calling me professor [. . .] but the one [book] I am always wanting her to pick, the only one that I am wanting to hear is the one that is holding all of the other book up, the big white Bible" (Iweala 24). This comes one page after a description of Agu's description of his first killing:

He is annoying me and I am bringing the machete up and down and up and down hearing KPWUDA KPWUDA every time and seeing just pink while I am hearing the laughing KEHI, KEHI, KEHI all around me. Then I am hitting his shoulder and then his chest and looking at how Commandant is smiling each time my knife is hitting the man. [. . .] I am vomiting everywhere. I cannot be stopping myself. Commandant is saying it is like falling in love, but I am not knowing what it is meaning. [. . .] I am growing hard between my leg. Is this like falling in love? (Iweala 21–22)

Later, having taken the drugs ("gun juice") that enable such activity,<sup>5</sup> Agu finds himself an object of terror: "But they are only screaming like Devil is coming for them. I am not Devil. I am not bad boy. Devil is not blessing me and I am not going

to hell. But still I am thinking maybe Devil born me and that is why I am doing all of this. But I am standing outside myself and I am watching it all happen" (48).

In describing the methodology of child "recruitment," Euan Denholm notes that "child abuse isn't an unhappy consequence of LRA [Ugandan Lord's Resistance Army] activity; it is the very driver of its existence" (this, in an army in which "eight out of ten [fighters] are estimated to be under eighteen") (Denholm 1). Agu's thoughts echo those of actual child soldiers whose words have been recorded by Amnesty International. From the Democratic Republic of the Congo: "When they came to my village, they asked my older brother whether he was ready to join the militia. He was just 17 and he said no; they shot him in the head. Then they asked me if I was ready to sign" (this child was thirteen); from Colombia: "They give you a gun and you have to kill the best friend you have. They do it to see if they can trust you. If you don't kill him, your friend will be ordered to kill you" (Coalition 1-2). And, just as in Iweala's novel, the rape of the young soldiers, boys or girls, by their "commandants" is frequent: from Zimbabwe: "There was no one in charge of the dormitories and on a nightly basis we were raped [. . .] you would just have a man on top of you, and you could not even see who it was. If we cried afterwards, we were beaten with hosepipes" (Coalition 1). In the repetitive rape of Agu by his commander, Iweala demonstrates the child's struggle to somehow assert his sense of value in the midst of the horrors he is made to endure and to enact on others. The book concludes with his quiet assertion: "I am all of this thing, I am all of this thing, but I am also having mother once, and she is loving me" (142). One cannot help but wonder if Starbuck's selected Ishmael Beah's reminiscence of his days as a child soldier between the ages of thirteen and fifteen, rather than Iweala's fictionalized version, because Beah doesn't leave the reader hanging: he shows that a kind of "reformation" from having been a killer as a child has actually apparently taken place in his own case. For Iweala's character, one is left wondering if a recuperation from the horrors is, perhaps, more than one might be able to expect.

We might, then, see in Mbachu's *War Games*, Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, and Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation* a gradual movement away from the specifics of the Biafran war, towards the universalizing of what that civil conflict can be made to represent. For Adichie, the war is a vortex that threatens to pull her characters to pieces: hers is a national novel in the sense that Ben Okri's *Famished Road* (1991) is a national novel, getting at the spirit of the Nigerian people, recreating that spirit in the specific lives of compelling characters, but at the same time refusing to be overtaken by the events of the war to the degree that some earlier novels may have been (Flora Nwapa's *Never Again*, Kalu Okpi's *Biafra Testament*, Elechi Amadi's *Sunset in Biafra*, Chukwuemeka Ike's *Sunset at Dawn*, and works like Raph Uwichue's *Reflections on the Nigerian Civil War: Facing the Future*). Adichie's is certainly one of the most accomplished literary works that takes the war as its setting, and fulfils Eddie Iroh's contention that only a novelist with some distance from the conflict would be able to produce "an unbiased, total assessment of the whole tragedy." Adichie's account is not the "total" reckoning that Iroh envisions, and is not completely without some positioning in the conflict's politics, but its literary finesse is extraordinary. Mbachu's lacks this finesse, but instead shares the committed anger of earlier accounts. Books like Mbachu's, despite their fictional form, lean in the direction of the literary *memoirs* that McLuckie endorses as offering "subaltern histories [emphasis added], cases of opting in and frequently challenging received

notions of what occurred, depicting the effect it had in real terms: human and subjective" (21). Iweala's, by rather stark contrast, has moved almost completely beyond Biafra, while drawing its energy from that conflict. His might be said to be a novel for the African continent, and beyond: a novel that gives voice to an *entire* subaltern social class around the globe that is victimized by both government and guerrilla insurgency. As noted, he begins his novel with a reference to Fela Kuti, but these are followed by two others. One is from Rimbaud's *A Season in Hell*: "I was able to expel from my mind all human hope. On every form of joy, in order to strangle it, I pounced stealthily like a wild animal." The other is even broader and more inclusive: he simply dedicates this, his first novel, to "those who have suffered." Biafra, for the youngest Nigerian generation, is no longer merely a matter of dates of military campaigns and of pyrrhic victories, of international indifference to a starving people, and the manipulation of their suffering by one side or the other and by the media; it has instead taken on the status of the killing fields of Cambodia and Rwanda, or a Babi Yar, a Wounded Knee, a Bhopal, a Jonestown, a Srebrenica, a My Lai, a Misolonghi. It has entered history as a defining moment of a very young nation's confrontation with its own inescapable guilt.

#### NOTES

1. "Two deaths—those of [Achebe's] mother and of his dear friend [poet, Cambridge University Press representative for Nigeria, and co-founder of Citadel Books] Christopher Okigbo—came to symbolize for him a basic change in his people's attitude toward death. His mother's death and internment were followed by the singing and dancing that had accompanied familial grief for countless generations. Not so that of Okigbo, killed in combat; by then death was becoming commonplace, and there was no longer any felt need for the traditional observances" (Swados 8).

2. In his 1969 meeting with Achebe, poets Gabriel Okara and John Ekwere, novelists Cyprian Ekwensi and Nkem Nwankwo, Harvey Swados was reminded by Okara that "not all of us are Ibos, as foreigners may tend to think. I myself am an Ijaw, and Ekwere there is an Ibibio. But today we are all Biafrans, and we are united as never before by a common bond" (Swados 12). On the other hand, Willfried F. Feuser ruefully notes that "the primary pattern of ethno-political fragmentation that characterized the Federation fatefully repeated itself on a minor scale in the new Republic where the Igbo majority confronted a minority of smaller ethnic groups that constituted about 40% of the total population—the Efik-Ibibio, Ekoi, Ogoja, Abua, Ijo, Kalabari, Andoni, Ogoni, Ikwere, Etche and others. As the planned secession of the land-locked North in 1953 and 1966 was chimerical, that of Biafra in 1967 was, to say the least, hazardous. If the Biafran leadership had discounted the minorities as security risks (as more often than not they subsequently turned out to be) the land of the Igbos would have been seen as being equally land-locked—shut off from the Cameroon border to the East and the Atlantic to the South by non-Igbo elements" (Feuser 115).

3. Why he deals with memoirs rather than with the fiction each of these writers has published dealing with the war will be discussed a bit later.

4. Abani surely presents a realistic subaltern powerlessness ("What was the point? Nothing is ever resolved, he thought. It just changes" [Abani 320]), and he makes the expected nod in Achebe's direction ("everything fell apart" [306]), but there is throughout his tale of squalor a bit of hope that sustains the irony ("Okay, Elvis done leave de country . . ." [318]), even if it comes with a stinger: the boy, newly named "Redemption," becomes viable only when he leaves the country.

5. In Beah's memoir this is described as a combination of gun powder and cocaine (Kirschling).

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