



Comparing War Writing – *HYS* War Passages

These passages from Chimamanda Adichie’s novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* describe the Biafran War. They can be used by students in the Comparing War Writing assessment. The passages come from the First Anchor Books edition, 2006.

(1)

“The Book: The World Was Silent When We Died

“The Second World War changed the world order. Empire was crumbling, and a vocal Nigerian elite, mostly from the South, had emerged.

“The North was wary: it feared domination from the more educated South and had always wanted a country separate from the infidel South anyway. But the British had to preserve Nigeria as it was, their prized creation, their large market, their thorn in France’s eye. To propitiate the North, they fixed the pre-Independence elections in favor of the North and wrote a new constitution that gave the North control of the central government.

“The South, too eager for independence, accepted this constitution. With the British gone, there would be good things for everyone: ‘white’ salaries long denied Nigerians, promotions, top jobs. Nothing was done about the clamor of the minority groups, and the regions were already competing so fiercely that some wanted separate foreign embassies.

“At Independence in 1960, Nigeria was a collection of fragments held in a fragile clasp” (193).

(2)

“When they lowered the coffin into the hold, a cheer rose in the crowd and spread, ripplelike, until it was one cheer, until Olanna felt that everybody there had become one. Somebody shouted, ‘Odenigbo!’ And it spread among the students. ‘Odenigbo! Address us!’

“Odenigbo climbed up to the podium waving his Biafran flag” swaths of red, black, and green and, at the center, a luminous half of a yellow sun.

“Biafra is born! We will lead Black Africa! We will live in security! Nobody will ever again attack us! Never again!” . . .

“Olanna watched them and realized with a sweet surge that they all felt what she felt, what Odenigbo felt, as though it were liquid steel instead of blood that flowed through their veins, as though they could stand barefoot over red-hot embers” (204-205).

(3)

“The Book: The World Was Silent When We Died

“Starvation was a Nigerian weapon of war. Starvation broke Biafra and Biafra fame and made Biafra last as long as it did. Starvation made the 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. Starvation propelled aid organizations to sneak-fly food into Biafra at night since both sides could not agree on routes. Starvation aided the careers of photographers. And starvation made the International Red Cross call Biafra its gravest emergency since the Second World War” (296-297).

(4)

“The next time Olanna went to the relief center, Okoromadu was talking to the crowd at the gate. Some women held rolled-up mats under their arms; they had spent the night outside the gates.

“‘We have nothing for you today. The lorry carrying our supplies from Awomama was hijacked on the road,’ [the supervisor] said, in the measured tone of a politician addressing his supporters. Olanna watched him. He enjoyed this, the power that came with knowing whether or not a group of people would eat. ‘We have military escorts, but it is soldiers who are hijacking us. They set up roadblocks and take everything from the lorry; they even beat the drivers. Come on Monday, and maybe we will be open.’

“A woman walked briskly up to him and thrust her baby boy into his arms. ‘Then take him! Feed him until you open again!’ She began to walk away. The baby was thin, jaundiced, squalling.

“‘*Bia manyi!* Come back, woman!’ Okoromadu was holding the baby with stiff arms, away from his body.

“The other women in the crowd began to chide the mother – Are you throwing your child away? *Ujo anaghi atu gi?* Are you walking I God’s face? – but it was Mrs. Muokelu who went over and took the baby from Okoromadu and placed it back in the mother’s arms.

“‘Take your child,’ she said. ‘It is not his fault that there is no food today’” (339).

(5)

“The siren did not go off early in the morning, and so when the fierce *wah-wah-wah* sounds of the bombers appeared from nowhere, as Olanna dissolved corn flour to make Baby’s pap, she knew this was it. Somebody would die. Perhaps they would all die. Death was the only thing that made any sense as she hunched underground, plucked some soil, rubbed it between her fingers, and waited for the bunker to explode. The bombing was louder and closer. The ground pulsed. She felt nothing. She was floating away from inside herself. Another explosion came and the earth vibrated, and one of the naked children crawling after crickets giggled. Then the explosions stopped and the people around her began to move. If she had died, if Odenigbo and Baby and Ugwu had died, the bunker would still smell like a freshly tilled farm and the sun would still rise and the crickets would still hop around. The war would continue without them. Olanna exhaled, filled with a frothy rage. It was the very sense of being inconsequential that pushed her from extreme fear to extreme fury. She had to matter. She would no longer exist limply, waiting to die. Until Biafra won, the vandals would no longer dictate the terms of her life.

“She was the first to climb out of the bunker. A woman had thrown herself down over the body of a child and was rolling around in the dirt, crying. ‘Gowon, what have I done to you? Gowon, *olee ihe m mere gi?*’ A few women gathered around and helped her up. ‘Stop crying, it is enough,’ they said. ‘What do you want your other children to do?’” (351).

(6)

“He paused a turned when he heard a shout from some young boys playing War in the middle of the school compound. They looked about ten or eleven years old, wore banana leaves on their heads, and held mock guns made from bamboo. The longest gun belonged to the commander of the Biafran side, a tall stern, a tall stern child with sharp cheekbones. ‘Advance!’ he shouted.

“The boys crept forward.

“Fire!

“They flung stones with wide sweeps of their arms and then, clutching their guns, they rushed toward the other boys, the Nigerian side, the losers.

“The bearded man began to clap. ‘These boys are wonderful! Just give them arms and they will send the vandals back.’

“Other people clapped and cheered the boys” (364).

(7)

“Harrison and Ikejide came in and began to drag the two packed suitcases out. Richard heard the roar of planes above. It couldn’t possibly be. There had never been an air raid in Port Harcourt and it made no sense that there would be one now, when Port Harcourt was about to fall and vandals were shelling close by. But the sound was unmistakable, and when Harrison shouted, ‘Enemy plane, sah!’ his words felt redundant.

“Richard ran toward Kainene, but she was already running out of the room, and he followed. She said, ‘Come out to the orchard!’ when she ran past Harrison and Ikejide crouched under the kitchen table.

“Outside, the air was humid. Richard looked up and saw them, two planes flying low, with an ominously streamlined efficiency to their shape, trailing silver-white lines in the sky. Fear spread helplessness throughout his body. They lay under the orange trees, he and Kainene, side by side, silent. Harrison and Ikejide had run out of the house; Harrison threw himself flat on the ground while Ikejide kept running, his body arched slightly forward, his arms flying around, his head bobbing. Then came the cold whistle of a mortar in the air and the crash as it landed and the boom as it exploded. Richard pressed Kainene to him. A piece of shrapnel, the size of a fist, wheezed past. Ikejide was still running and, in the moment that Richard glanced away and back, Ikejide’s head was gone. The body was running, arched slightly forward, arms flying around, but there was no head. There was only a bloodied neck. Kainene screamed. The body crashed down near her long American car, the planes receded and disappeared into the distance, and they all lay still for long minutes, until Harrison got up and said, ‘I am getting bag’” (397-398).

(8)

“Ugwu thought of Eberechi’s fingers pulling the skin of his neck, the wetness of her tongue in his mouth. The vandals began to shell. There was first the whistle of a mortar in the air and then the boom as the mortar fell and hot shrapnel flew around. A patch of grass caught fire, lit up, and Ugwu saw a ferret by the cluster of trees ahead, hunched like a giant tortoise. Then he saw them: crouched silhouettes moving forward, a herd of men. They were in his killing range and it felt too soon, he had expected more to happen before they delivered themselves to him, before he detonated his *ogbunigwe* and it pushed outward in a spray of violent metal. He took a deep breath. Carefully, firmly, he connected the cable and the plug in his hands and the immediate forceful blow startled him, although he had expected it. For the briefest moment, fear clenched his bowels. Perhaps he had not calculated well enough. Perhaps he had missed them. But he heard somebody close to him shout, ‘Target!’ The word reverberated in his head as they waited for long minutes before hauling themselves out of the trench and going over to the scattered corpses of the vandals.

“Naked them! Take the trousers and shirts!’ somebody shouted.

“Boots and guns only!’ another voice shouted. ‘No time. No time. *Ngwa-ngwa!*’ Their reinforcements are on the way!’

“Ugwu bent over a lean body. He yanked off the boots. In the pockets, he felt a cold hard kola nut and warm thick blood. The second body, close by, stirred when Ugwu toughed it and he moved back. There was a forced gasping breath before it became still. Ugwu shivered” (454).

(9)

“‘The lizards have become smarter. They run raster now and hide under blocks of cement,’ the boy who had climbed told Ugwu. They roasted and shared the lizard, shoosing other children away. Later the boy offered Ugwu a tiny bit of his stringy share. Ugwu thanked him and shook his head and realized that he would never be able to capture that child on paper, never be able to describe well enough the fear that dulled the eyes of mothers in the refugee camp when the bomber planes charged out of the sky. He would never be able to depict the very bleakness of bombing hungry people. But he tried, and the more he wrote the less he dreamed.

“Olanna was teaching some children to recite the multiplications tables the morning that Kainene rushed up to the flame tree.

“‘Can you believe who is responsible for that small girl Urenwa’s pregnancy?’ Kainene asked, and Ugwu almost did not recognize her. Here eyes bulged out of her angular face, filled with rage and tears. ‘Can you believe it is Father Marcel?’

“Olanna stood up. ‘*Gini?* What are you saying?’

“‘Apparently I’ve been blind; she’s not the only one,’ Kainene said. ‘He f---s most of them before he gives them the crayfish that I slave to get here!’

“‘Later, Ugwu watched Kainene push at Father Marcel’s chest with both hands, shouting into his face, shoving him so hard that Ugwu feared the man would fall. ‘*Amosu!* You devil!’ Then she turned to Father Jude. ‘How could you stay here and let him spread the legs of starving girls? How will you account for this to your God?’” (498-499).

(10)

“A week passed. A Red Cross van arrived at the refugee camp and two women handed out cups of milk. Many families left the camp, to search for relatives or to hide in the bush from the Nigerian soldiers who were coming with whips. But the first time Olanna saw Nigerian soldiers, on the main road, they did not hold whips. They walked up and down and spoke loud Yoruba to one another and laughed and gestured to the village girls. ‘Come marry me now, I go give you rice and beans’” (515).