**Knowledgeable Research** (An International Peer-Reviewed Multidisciplinary Journal) **ISSN 2583-6633**
**Available Online: http://knowledgeableresearch.com Vol.04, No.4, April, 2025**

# "Half of a Yellow Sun": Examining the Erosion of Human Rights in Wartime

Amrita Singh (Research scholar) and Prof. Shikha Singh
Department of English, DDU Gorakhpur University, Gorakhpur- 273009

**********

## Abstract

*The Nigeria-Biafra conflict, which ranged from 1967 to 1970, brought immense suffering, with widespread starvation, brutal ethnic cleansing, and oppressive political tactics. The novel Half of a Yellow Sun vividly illustrates the harsh realities of forced displacement, sexual violence, and profound human rights violations that civilians endured during war. This research paper examines into the extensive dimensions of these human rights abuses, illuminating the systematic atrocities perpetrated throughout the conflict. This paper undertakes a thorough examination of historical documents, eyewitness testimonies, and scholarly research to delve into the reasons behind and the resulting effects of these violations, the role of international intervention, and the enduring effects on Nigerian society. It emphasizes the urgent need for accountability, reconciliation as a whole and the establishment of strong international mechanisms to avert such violations in future conflicts*

***Keywords:*** *Biafran War, Human Rights, Rape, Starvation, Genocide, violence, Postcolonialism, Igbo People, violence, Female Empowerment, Family.*

**********

## INTRODUCTION

War and human rights are closely related subjects. In times of war, established international laws meant to protect civilians and fundamental human rights are often disregarded and violated. Such violations encompass devastating acts, including genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. Even during the chaos of war, international human rights and humanitarian laws strive to protect the dignity and humanity of every individual. The United Nations and its Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) are key organizations dedicated to observing and working to prevent violations of fundamental human rights within areas affected by conflict.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel, "Half of a Yellow Sun," unfolds during the Biafran War (1967–1970), a period marked by intense human suffering and hardship. The narrative vividly portrays the atrocities of the conflict, highlighting the tragic human rights violations that occurred. Through the perspectives of its characters, the novel vividly depicts the atrocities committed during the war, including mass killings, starvation, and widespread displacement. The narrative poignantly underscores the harrowing repercussions of colonial legacies, the fraught dynamics of ethnic tensions, and the pervasive nature of political corruption on the existence of everyday individuals. The story intricately intertwines the journeys of its main

characters—Olanna, a progressive Nigerian woman of Igbo heritage; her partner Odenigbo, an intellectual and passionate advocate for the Igbo community; their devoted houseboy Ugwu; and Richard, a British journalist who is romantically involved with Olanna's sister, Kainene. Through these characters, Adichie unveils the harrowing realities of wartime atrocities, including forced conscription, sexual violence, severe hunger, and indiscriminate killings. Adichie's poignant storytelling illuminates the deep effects of these harrowing events on both individuals and communities, capturing the anguish and strength of those who endured this tragic period in history. Her evocative prose enables the reader to experience the raw emotions of suffering and perseverance, bringing this dark chapter to life with striking intensity.

**Background of War-**

Ethnic tensions in Nigeria remain a major challenge in the country's political landscape. The origins of the Nigerian Civil War can be traced back to the British colonial era when Great Britain unified various ethnic groups without considering their distinct identities. On January 1, 1914, Sir Frederick Lugard combined the Northern and Southern Protectorates, a move often criticized as the "mistake of 1914" or an "unholy union." This integration brought together more than 250 ethnic groups with unique historical and cultural backgrounds. The northern region is largely home to the Hausa and Fulani communities, the southwest to the Yoruba people, and the southeast to the Igbo population. These groups differ not only in cultural traditions but also in economic practices, frequently leading to conflicts—particularly along religious lines, between Muslims and Christians.

Richard, a British journalist in the novel, living in Nigeria during the conflict, writes an article arguing that the perception of recent violence as the result of long-standing hatred is misleading. He explains that northern and southern tribes have interacted for centuries, as evidenced by historical artifacts like the Igbo-Ukwu beads. While these groups have engaged in wars and slave raids, the scale of massacre witnessed in the conflict is unprecedented. According to Richard, this animosity is relatively recent, stemming directly from British colonial policies of divide-and-rule. By exploiting tribal differences and preventing unity, the British administration ensured easier control over the vast and diverse nation.

After the British left, the nation faced widespread demands for an improved standard of living, accompanied by urgent calls to address corruption and the abuse of power.

Workers became increasingly dissatisfied with their low wages and frequently threatened to go on strike. Amid rising tensions, a faction of Igbo junior army officers, spearheaded by Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu and Major Emmanuel Ifeajuna, staged a military coup on January 15, 1966. This coup significantly heightened tensions between Northerners and Igbos. Northerners perceived the coup as a calculated attempt by the Igbos to eliminate their key political and military leaders. Tensions escalated further due to the widespread perception that General Ironsi, the newly appointed head of state, did not take decisive action against those responsible for the coup. The alleged military officials responsible for executing the top Northern officers were allowed to remain in the Nigerian Army, despite protests from other officers. Ironsi's issuance of the Unification Decree 34 deepened Northern resentment towards Southerners. The decree sought to dismantle the federal governance structure and introduce a unitary system in its place. The North viewed this as an attempt by the South-East to seize control of the country's power.

On July 29, 1966, Northern military officer Murtala Muhammed orchestrated a counter-coup, leading to a violent retaliation against high-ranking Igbo officers. This attack resulted in the tragic deaths of Head of State Aguiyi-Ironsi and Brigadier Adekunle Fajuyi. In the aftermath, Lieutenant-Colonel Yakubu Gowon, a Northern officer, assumed the role of Supreme Commander of the Nigerian Armed Forces. One of his immediate actions was the reversal of Unification Decree 34, reinstating Nigeria's federal system of governance. The counter-coup shifted power back to the North and led to severe and widespread persecution of Southerners, particularly the Igbos in the North. The most notorious day of this massacre was September 29, 1966, infamously known as "Black Thursday." On that day, millions of Southerners fled the North, with some even claiming they escaped with the decapitated heads of their loved ones. According to Falola and Heaton (***History***, p. 175) and Anthony (***Poison and Medicine***, ch. 3), “The estimates vary widely, but up to 100,000 easterners may have been killed in these months, with perhaps 20,000 or 30,000 in September alone. These eruptions of violence provoked a flow of about two million Igbo refugees to the eastern region” (qtd.in Heerten 49).

The aftermath of these harrowing events sparked strong condemnation from Southern leaders, most notably Colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu, the military governor of the Eastern Region. Ojukwu criticized Gowon for his perceived indifference toward the widespread killings of Igbos in the North. Ojukwu

demanded that Gowon immediately reverse Decree 34, but Gowon and his Northern supporters refused. To ease rising tensions, a meeting was convened in Aburi, Ghana, later recognized as the Aburi Conference. Both parties agreed on the goal of a unified Nigeria, and Gowon initially accepted Ojukwu's terms. However, "Further negotiations led nowhere. On May 26, the Eastern Region's Consultative Assembly mandated Ojukwu to declare independence. The next day, Gowon responded with a radio broadcast announcing that Nigeria would be partitioned into twelve federal states" (Heerten 50). Through character dialogue, the novel reveals the Igbo people's fear that Gowon's abandonment of the Aburi accord signaled a desire to oppress them, "…Gowon should have followed the agreement he and Ojukwu signed in Aburi, … Gowon reneging after Aburi meant that he did not wish the Igbo well, … he wants one Nigeria with a unitary government, but a unitary government was the very reason that he and his people killed Igbo officers" (Adichie 159).

Ojukwu viewed Gowon's actions as a deliberate effort to weaken Eastern Nigeria. Within days, on May 30, he officially proclaimed the region's independence, naming it the **Republic of Biafra**. By early July, the Nigerian Civil War erupted as Federal forces advanced into Biafran territory, marking the beginning of a fierce conflict. The declaration of independence sparked a brutal 30-month conflict between the Nigerian government and the newly formed Republic of Biafra. Over the following years, the nation suffered immense devastation, with hundreds of thousands losing their lives. In July 1967, the Federal Republic of Nigeria officially launched a war against Biafra. The Nigerian Army quickly enforced a blockade on all shipments to and from the region, severely crippling Biafra's supply chain. This led to widespread food shortages and the loss of the resource-rich Bonny Island in Rivers State. By early 1968, Nigerian forces had seized several strategic Biafran towns, including Umuahia, Enugu, Onne, Ikot Ekpene, and Arochukwu. Despite these setbacks, the determined Biafrans continued to resist. The blockade triggered a severe humanitarian crisis, with widespread starvation and disease affecting Biafran civilians. Millions of children suffered from malnutrition, particularly kwashiorkor, a condition caused by protein deficiency. Photographs of emaciated children garnered global attention, prompting various volunteer organizations to provide aid. International journalists criticized the Nigerian government for allegedly targeting civilians attempting to access relief supplies. The widespread coverage of these events sparked international outrage and demonstrations.

Pro-Biafran journalists drew parallels between the conflict and the Holocaust of World War II, using terms like genocide and extermination to garner support for their cause. The Biafran Ministry of Information, in its publication ***Genocide***, highlighted a central theme of their political rhetoric: in an era defined by human rights, genocide inevitably leads to the establishment of a new state to safeguard the victims of such heinous crimes. This notion became a recurring motif in Biafran propaganda. According to Biafran propagandists, the Nigerian government's genocidal actions would inevitably lead to the establishment of the state of Biafra, much like "Hitler's crime of genocide against European Jews led to the creation of the state of Israel" (qtd. in Heerten 64). The war's devastation extended far beyond the battlefield, inflicting widespread civilian casualties, displacement, and severe human rights violations.

**Human rights**

"Human rights are rights we have simply because we exist as human beings - they are not granted by any state. These universal rights are **inherent** to us all, regardless of nationality, sex, national or ethnic origin, color, religion, language, or any other status. They range from the most fundamental - the right to life - to those that make life worth living, such as the rights to food, education, work, health, and liberty". (OHCHR)

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), established by the United Nations in 1948, serves as a fundamental framework for global human rights. As it marks its 76th anniversary on December 10, 2024, the UDHR continues to shape international human rights legislation. Comprising 30 articles, it sets the foundation for current and future human rights agreements. While **International Human Rights Law (IHRL)** remains applicable at all times, whether in peace or conflict, **International Humanitarian Law (IHL)** is specifically enforced during periods of armed conflict. "International humanitarian law (IHL) is a set of rules that seeks, for humanitarian reasons, to limit the effects of armed conflict. It protects persons who are not, or are no longer, directly or actively participating in hostilities, and imposes limits on the means and methods of warfare. IHL is also known as "the law of war" or "the law of armed conflict". IHL is part of public international law, which is made up primarily of treaties, customary international law and general principles of law" (ICRC). Both **International Humanitarian Law (IHL)** and **International Human Rights Law (IHRL)** are designed to safeguard human life, well-being, and dignity, yet they achieve this through distinct approaches.

**Incident-Based Study of Human Rights Violations in Half of a Yellow Sun**

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* recounts the harrowing human rights violation experiences during The Nigerian Civil War, which unfolded between 1967 and 1970. The conflict inflicted immense suffering on the Igbo people, stripping them of their livelihoods and subjecting them to unimaginable horrors. Adichie did not live through the war herself. "I wrote this novel because I wanted to write about love and war, and in particular because I grew up in the shadow of Biafra, … Both my grandfathers were killed in the Nigeria-Biafra war, and I wanted to engage with that history in order to start a conversation about the war – which is still hardly discussed in Nigeria," she says. "It is a personal issue – my father has tears in his eyes when he speaks of losing his father, my mother still cannot speak at length about losing her father in a refugee camp" (Kimber).

Violations of Fundamental Rights: Equality, Liberty, and Dignity- Mass killings and ethnic cleansing done by Nigerian soldiers, "Instructions were given his soldiers to kill every male child of seven years and over. This was done everywhere Nigerian soldiers went. Girls were carted off from Biafran homes to Lagos and Northern Nigeria. Gowon is fighting a war of conquest, nothing more. The aim is genocide" (Anthony 211). In ***Half of a Yellow Sun***, Adichie vividly depicts the Hausa attack on the Igbo people in the north through Olanna's eyes. The traumatic events in Kano leave Olanna deeply shaken, as she discovers the mutilated remains of her uncle, aunt, and cousin. The sheer brutality of the violence shatters her sense of safety, forcing her to confront the grim reality of the conflict.

Adichie's description of Sabon Gari paints a haunting picture: the street is eerily deserted, smoke rises ominously, and the compound gate lies flattened. Olanna's horror intensifies as she encounters the bodies—Uncle Mbaezi sprawled face down with a gaping wound on his head, and Aunty Ifeka's lifeless form marked by smaller, bloodied cuts. The scene captures the devastating impact of the violence on both personal and communal levels. Amidst the chaos and brutality in Kano, Olanna, with Mohammed's assistance, escapes on a crowded train. Years later, she recounts the harrowing experience to Ugwu while he is writing a book, "the train full of people who had cried and shouted and urinated on themselves." (Adichie 410) and the woman sitting next to her nudges her and unveils a calabash containing the severed head of her daughter. "Take a look,' she said again. Olanna looked into the bowl. She saw the little girl's head with the ashy-grey skin and the braided hair and rolled-back eyes and open mouth. She stared at it for a while before

she looked away. Somebody screamed. The woman closed the calabash. 'Do you know,' she said, 'it took me so long to plait this hair? She had such thick hair' (Adichie149).

This traumatic event left a profound and lasting impact on Olanna, deeply scarring her emotionally and altering her perspective on life. At Odenigbo's doorstep, her legs gave way, and she lost control of her bladder, overwhelmed by the weight of her experience. Odenigbo gently carried her inside, bathed her, and kept Baby from embracing her too tightly. Once Baby was asleep, Olanna recounted the horrors she had witnessed—the headless bodies clad in vaguely familiar clothing, Uncle Mbaezi's hand with its still-twitching fingers, the child's head in the calabash with its rolled-back eyes, and the corpses' unsettling greyish skin tone, resembling a poorly erased blackboard. The vivid details of the scene underscored the brutality of the violence and its devastating effect on Olanna. Her sister, Kainene, also endures the same horrifying fear of beheading when she witnesses a raid by the Nigerian army in Port Harcourt. During the attack, her servant, Ikejide, is tragically killed while trying to escape the artillery shells. "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" (Adichie 317). Richard, a British character deeply connected to the Igbo people through his relationship with Kainene, endures the harrowing ordeal of witnessing Nnaemeka's violent death at the hands of a Hausa soldier at the airport. "Nnaemeka's chest blew open, a splattering red mass, and Richard dropped the note in his hand. … Richard felt himself wet his trousers. There was a painful ringing in his eyes. He almost missed his flight because as the other passengers walked shakily to the plane, he stood aside, vomiting" (153). Richard has been deeply affected by the trauma of the massacres, leaving him emotionally devastated.

Paragraph 5 of the **UN Declaration on the Protection of Women and Children in Emergency and Armed Conflict (1974)** emphasizes "The right to freedom against torture, cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment is an absolute right and violation cannot be justified on the grounds of war, threat of war, internal instability or other public emergencies." (qtd.in Anzaku 65) In Half of a Yellow Sun, the Igbo massacres deeply traumatize the characters, leaving them with enduring emotional scars. However, the novel also brings to light an even more horrific act committed by soldiers during the war**:** ***rape***. This atrocity is depicted as a weapon of war, inflicting immense physical and psychological

suffering on the victims. Lorch 1995 "There is more than one way to commit genocide. One way is mass murder, killing individual members of a national, political, or cultural group. Another is to destroy a group's identity by decimating cultural and social bonds. Martial rape does both. Many women and girls are killed when rapists are finished with them. If survivors become pregnant or are known to be rape survivors, cultural, political, and national unity may be thrown into chaos" (qtd.in card 8).

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's portrayal of rape in the novel serves as a stark critique of the objectification of women in African society, especially during times of war. The dialogue between Ugwu and his fellow soldiers, where they refer to the bar girl as "food," underscores the dehumanization and commodification of women. Ugwu's unsettling comment, "I just like to eat before others," followed by the response, "The food is still fresh," (Adichie 365), highlights the disturbing reduction of women to mere objects for exploitation. Maria Eriksson Baaz's interviews with Congolese soldiers uncover disturbing attitudes towards women during wartime. One soldier's comments emphasize the dangers of objectifying women, demonstrating how deeply entrenched masculine norms contribute to their degradation. "women are like flowers, and she could also satisfy [his] needs. When you have been in battle it is like a desert, and she could help you with that" (Baaz and Stern 506).

The gang-rape scene involving the young bar girl is undeniably harrowing. Her calm and helpless demeanour during the assault underscores a tragic reality: the normalization of such violence against women. It reflects how deeply ingrained and accepted this brutality has become, to the point where women feel resigned to their fate. In her book ***Women and Conflict in the Nigerian Civil War***, Dr. Egodi Uchendu examines how daily activities, such as fetching water or firewood, often exposed women to mistreatment. Many young women believed that resisting a soldier's advances or refusing to meet sexual demands could result in death, leading them to avoid putting up a strong fight when cornered or abducted. The fear of armed soldiers also deterred men from intervening to protect female victims of sexual abuse. Some men recounted being threatened with death for attempting to help, as evidenced by the tragic case of Chuks Momah, who was fatally shot in Asaba in October 1967 while trying to rescue his wife from a soldier. Such incidents discouraged others from intervening in situations involving soldiers and captured women. "One known proof of this was Chuks Momah, who was shot at Asaba when he tried to rescue his wife from a soldier in October 1967. Such antecedents

incapacitated persons who wished to step into a matter involving a soldier and a captured woman." (Uchendu 103)

Masculinity, power, war, and rape are deeply intertwined, forming a system of sexism that impacts Ugwu and reveals the negative effects on his character. Adichie explores the complexity of human nature, illustrating through the tragedy of war that her characters are not solely defined by their traumas or the systems of power they navigate. Ugwu himself becomes a victim, shaped by the same toxic masculinity he perpetuates. For soldiers, the lack of sexual activity is often equated with a loss of masculinity, and in the chaotic environment of war—where societal norms collapse and the rules of warfare dominate—this frequently leads to acts of rape. The soldiers' tendency to shift responsibility from themselves to their circumstances underscores the horror and tragedy of wartime sexual violence. Despite acknowledging the immorality of their actions, they irrationally justify rape as a means to fulfill their desires and reaffirm their masculinity. Special julies one of the many characters informs Odenigbo about the current situation in Nsukka and Enugu, "They are even looting toilet seats... A man who escaped from Udi told me. And they choose the best houses and force people's wives and daughters to spread their legs for them and cook for them." (Adichie 285). Another episode of rape is recounted when Okeoma revealed that the new leader of the Biafran army, a white mercenary, used defenceless young females for his personal enjoyment, 'He throws girls on their backs in the open where the men can see him and does them, all the time holding his bag of money in one hand' (Adichie 323) Father Marcel, who is entrusted with the responsibility of supporting the malnourished Biafrans in the refugee camp, has been heinously abusing his power by exploiting young girls, trading food for sexual favours. His actions reveal a complete lack of concern for their well-being, as he takes advantage of their desperate circumstances for his own perverse desires, resulting in her pregnancy. Adichie uses these scenes to highlight the pervasive and systemic nature of sexual ferocity, especially in war zones. The girl's passive acceptance serves as a powerful commentary on the societal conditioning that forces women to endure such atrocities silently.

"Acts of rape and sexual violence are expressly prohibited by IHL and IHRL in any circumstance, at all times and against any person." (Gaggioli 503). In the landmark case of ***Prosecutor v. Akayesu*** (ICTR-964-T, 1998), the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) found Jean-Paul Akayesu guilty of crimes against humanity, holding him responsible for the heinous acts of rape and

sexual violence perpetrated during the Rwandan genocide. “The ICTR went further to hold that acts of sexual violence include forcible sexual penetration of the vagina, anus or oral cavity by a penis and or of the vagina or anus by some other object, and sexual abuse, such as forced nudity.” … It was further noted by the tribunal that in that case that acts ofsexual violence can be prosecuted as constituent elements of a genocidal campaign” (qtd.in Anzaku 66). This landmark judgment highlighted the immense suffering endured by the victims and recognized rape constitutes a severe violation of human rights. The court's decision underscored the significance of tackling the issue and taking legal action against sexual violence during conflict, offering a sense of justice and acknowledgement to those who suffer through these heinous crimes.

Violation of right to food- The adoption of the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)** in 1948 marked a pivotal moment, as it was the first instance of global recognition that access to food is a fundamental human right. The declaration underscored the idea that the right to food is an essential component of a broader, interconnected framework of human rights, all of which are inseparable and mutually dependent. Article 25(1) of the UDHR provides, “Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and his family, including food” (Abeyratne).

“In the Goodell Report, 18,000 words of documented suffering unequalled since World War II one can find ample evidence of genocide as defined by the Convention. The Report of the Biafra Study Mission (Congressional Record-Senate, Feb. 25th, 1969, S1975 - S1987) (Jean Mayer, George Axinn, Roy Brown, George Orick collaborating) states, "The rock bottom minimum estimate of mortality due to famine during the months of August; September and October, 1968 is 500,000. We estimate that an additional 500,000 died of starvation in the six months preceding that period and in the three months since, for a minimum total of 1,000,000. Informed foreign relief personnel working in Biafra in 1968-69 have made estimates on the basis of their samplings which go up to twice that figure." (S1977) "The population is in a poor state of health: both mortality and morbidity (from famine and infectious diseases) are extremely high." (S1987) The surviving children who have suffered varying degrees of brain damage number in the hundreds of thousands. "There appears to be general agreement that the birth rate of Biafrans is markedly decreased." (S1977) The Report speaks of "the systematic bombing and strafing of hospitals, schools, refugee camps, and feeding stations …” Red Cross insignia

increase the likelihood of air attacks . . . Starving mothers cannot produce milk . . . 2,000 children have been transferred out of Biafra." (Keil 1)

The civil war led to severe hardship for the Igbo people, particularly due to the shortage of essential food supplies. Olanna's memories of times when food was plentiful are especially painful, as they starkly contrast with the severe hunger and hardship the Igbo people endure during the civil war. She conveys this sentiment when she asks Ugwu, recalling how they once discarded soup with meat after just a day. Now, she must visit relief centers to collect dried egg yolk, waiting in long lines for hours. The moment when Olanna, after much struggle, finally obtains food for her family but is then robbed by soldiers, highlights both the overwhelming hunger and the moral dilemmas faced by those who, meant to be protectors, are themselves fighting for survival, "the shell-shocked soldier followed her out of the gate. She quickened her pace…but five of them all in tattered army uniforms, soon surrounded her. … 'Aunty!' 'Sister!' 'Bring am now!' Hungry go kill all of us!' Olanna clutched her basket tightly. A hot, childish urge to cry rose in her. …they began to come closer, all together, as if some internal voice were directing them. … the one wearing a blue beret grasped her basket, took the tin of corned beef, and ran off. …Olanna stood still and cried silently because the corned beef was had never been hers" (Adichie 272).

Women would often spend the night outside relief center gates, yet many still left empty-handed without receiving food. In the novel, an incident captures this despair—a relief worker informs them, "We have nothing for you today. The lorry carrying our supplies from Awomama was hijacked on the road" (Adichie 270). The devastating news shattered the impoverished mothers, leaving them grief-stricken as they grappled with the heartbreaking reality of being unable to feed their starving children. "A women 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." (Adichie 270). Children were suffering from kwashiorkor, because of lack of protein rich food, all they can barely eat was garri and yam that also ones in a day or two, hunger forced them to eat all kinds of insects and animals. There was no food available anywhere in Biafra in exchange for money; money was nothing but a piece of paper. The severe food shortage deeply affected Olanna's life, to the point where Baby Ola, overwhelmed by hunger, cried out to be allowed to eat a lizard. Richard writes a poem for the epilogue

of his book, which perfectly narrates the condition of Biafran children in 1968,

"Did you see photos in sixty-eight
Of children with their hair becoming rust:
Sickly patches nestled on those small heads,
then falling off, like rotten leaves on dust?
Imagine children with arms like toothpicks,
With footballs for bellies and skin stretched thin.
It was kwashiorkor - difficult word,
A word that was not quite ugly enough, a sin."
(Adichie 375)

During the Biafran crisis, children's needs constituted a significant portion of the relief efforts for the blockaded population. By mid-October 1968, **Caritas** operated 372 feeding centers, serving 275,000 daily meals, while the **World Council of Churches (WCC)** provided an equal number. Nightly airlifts from **Sao Tome** delivered essential high-protein foods and medical supplies, including Norwegian codfish, Dutch medicines and blood plasma, Italian children's camp equipment, Danish medical aid, German hospital serums, and butter oil, along with milk, canned meat, beans, rice, and fish from Catholic Relief Services in the United States.

By September 1969, the **Joint Church Aid (JCA)** had 16 aircraft available, transporting **150 to 180 tons of food and medicine** each night, meeting only **40% of the minimum requirement** for an effective relief operation. Many feeding centers established sickbays to treat severely malnourished children. While airlift efforts significantly reduced child mortality rates, additional action was urgently needed to care for the many sick and dying children.

Heart-wrenching media pictures and narratives from Biafra captivated the world's attention, generating an extraordinary wave of international solidarity with the suffering civilians. Various humanitarian organizations swiftly mobilized to assist both sides of the conflict. By mid-1968, four major humanitarian airlifts—including the **INALWA airlift** by the **International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)** and the **Joint Church Airlift** coordinated by Protestant and Catholic churches—delivered relief supplies into Biafra, often under the cover of darkness. In their desperate bid to win the war, Nigerians seemed to lose sight of their humanity. Statements from key Nigerian figures, such as **Colonel Adekunle**, made their stance abundantly clear. His infamous remarks, "We shoot at everything that moves... even things that don't move," and "I want to prevent even one Ibo from having a single piece to eat before their capitulation." The situation worsened when a Nigerian MIG shot down a Red Cross plane on June 5, 1969,

effectively ending Red Cross relief efforts to Biafra. Chief Awolowo, the top civilian in the Nigerian junta, stated bluntly, "All is fair in war and starvation is one of the weapons of war. I don't see why we should feed our enemies fat, only to fight us harder" (Keil 2). By the time Biafra was defeated and the war came to an end in January 1970, approximately two million lives had been lost due to combat, famine, and illness.

Violation of Right to Desirable Work- In the novel through Ugwu we get to know that he is not allowed to leave the compound because, "Stories of forced conscription were everywhere… a boy down the street had been dragged away in the afternoon and taken, with a shaved head and no training, straight to the front in the evening."(284) Ugwu was conscripted into the army against his will. On one occasion, Olanna managed to save him by bribing the soldiers. However, later on, when he was outside the house with his girlfriend, Eberechi, he was captured by Biafran soldiers. Ugwu, once an innocent and eager young houseboy, is unwillingly thrown into the brutal realities of war.

Violation of Freedom from Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, and Correspondence, Right to Free Movement in and out of the Country, Right to Own Property, Right to Social Security, Right to Rest and Leisure, Right to Adequate Living Standard- When Ugwu was in Nsukka he saw that, " people trooping on the dirt road that ran through Abba. They were dragging goats, carrying yams and boxes on their heads, chickens and rolled-up mats under their arms, kerosene lamps in their hands. The children carried small basins or pulled smaller children along. …did not know where they are going" (Adichie 194). As the story unfolds through Ugwu's eyes, we learn about the dire circumstances faced by civilians who were compelled to abandon their homes. One woman, in particular, shares her poignant reason for fleeing, "We were on our way back from the market when we discovered the vandals had occupied the junction and were shelling inside the village. We could not go home we had to turn and run. I had only this wrapper and blouse and the small money from selling my pepper. I don't know where my two children are, the ones I left at home to go to the market.' she started to cry" (Adichie 289). The condition of the relief centres was deplorable. "Cooking pots, sleeping mats, metal boxes, and bamboo beds cluttered it so completely that the room did not look as though it had been anything else but a home for disparate groups of people with nowhere else to go." A woman with her wrinkled face child washing cassava tubers in a pan made, "Ugwu nearly choked when he came close and realized that the rotten smell came from her water, … The smell was awful,

nose-filling, the smell of a dirty toilet and rancid steamed beans and boiled eggs gone bad" (Adichie 289). Alice one of the refugees get to know through someone that "The vandals took our town many weeks ago and they announced that all the indigenes should come out and say 'One Nigera' 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 384).

Violation of Right to Education- Adichie critically examines the transformative potential of education within the tumultuous context of the Nigeria-Biafra War. The narrative underscores education as a pivotal instrument for social mobility and personal empowerment, most vividly illustrated through Ugwu's trajectory. His progression from a rural youth, initially external to the academic sphere of the university community, to an educated individual, elucidates the narrative's central argument regarding education's capacity for self-emancipation. Ugwu's resolute pursuit of knowledge, even amidst wartime exigencies, highlights its perceived instrumentality for both survival and personal development.

However, the novel also presents a counter-narrative, detailing the devastating consequences of the war's disruption of the educational infrastructure. The systemic collapse of formal education means that an entire generation of children misses out on crucial learning opportunities, which severely hinders their future prospects and personal growth. The novel emphasizes the critical role of education in overcoming adversity and building a foundation for a brighter future. Olanna's determination to teach children during the war underscores her understanding of education's importance. "Ugwu arranged three benches on the veranda for Olanna's class and two by compound entrance for Mrs Muokelu's; for his own class with the youngest pupils, he placed two benches near the pile of cement blocks. … 'We will teach mathematics, English, and civics every day,' Olanna said to Ugwu and Mrs Muokelu… 'we have to make sure that when the war is over, they will all fit back easily into the regular school" (Adichie 291).

This novel by Adichie powerfully conveys the struggles and harrowing experiences of the Biafran War but the deep trauma and helplessness felt by Biafran people can never be truly captured in any book. Adichie herself expresses this through the character of Ugwu. Ugwu realized this while writing his very first book, "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

bombers 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" (Adichie 398)

**Conclusion**

The novel captures the distressing experiences of civilians trapped in the turmoil of this brutal war. The circumstances in Nigeria have been extremely grim, with numerous accounts of civilian deaths caused by military airstrikes, enforced displacement, gender-based violence, and severe breaches of fundamental human rights. Adichie's novel is a poignant reminder of the vital importance of protecting human rights and ensuring that such horrors are never repeated. As we ponder the powerful message of this narrative, we are inspired to stand up for justice, show empathy, and uphold our shared humanity. In doing so, we honour the lives and stories of those who suffered, and we commit to building a world where such atrocities are consigned to history.

**References**

Abeyratne, Rehan. "Right to Food Under International Law – Economic, Social and Cultural Rights"; Group/ Collective Rights.
ebooks.inflibnet.ac.in/hrdp04/chapter/right-to-food-under- international-law.

Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Half of a Yellow Sun*. 4th Estate, 2006.

Anthony, Douglas. "Ours is a war of survival': Biafra, Nigeria and arguments about genocide,1966–70." *Journal of Genocide Research*, vol. 16, nos. 2–3, 2014, pp. 205–225. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2014.936701

Anzaku, Umaru Raymond. "War and Human Rights: An Overview of the Application of International Humanitarian Law and International Human Rights Law in Armed Conflict." Master's Thesis, Nasarawa State University, Keffi, 2017.

Baaz, Maria Eriksson, and Maria Stern. "Why Do Soldiers Rape? Masculinity, Violence, and Sexuality in the Armed Forces in the Congo (DRC)." *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 53, no. 2, June 2009, pp. 495–518. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2478.2009.00543.x.

Card, Claudia. "Rape as a Weapon of War." *Hypatia*, vol. 11, no. 4, 1996, pp. 5–18. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3810388. Accessed 19 Sept. 2024.

Gloria Gaggioli, "Sexual Violence in Armed Conflicts: A Violation of International Humanitarian and Human Rights Law in Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict International Review of the Red Cross, Humanitarian Debate: Law, Policy, Action" (Vol.96, No.SH ICRC, Geneva, 2014).

Heerten, Lasse. *The Biafran War and Postcolonial Humanitarianism: Spectacles of Suffering*. Cambridge UP, 2017.

Keil, Charles. "The Price of Nigerian Victory." *Africa Today*, vol. 17, no. 1, 1970, pp. 1–3. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/4185054. Accessed 12 Feb. 2025.

Kimber, Charlie. "Interview: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie." *Socialist Review Archive*, issue 310, 1 Oct. 2006.

Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. "What are HumanRights?"*OHCHR*,www.ohchr.org/en/what-are-human-rights. Accessed 3 April 2025.

Omenka, Nicholas. "Children in the Nigeria-Biafra War: A Study on Their Evacuation, Rehabilitation and Repatriation." *ResearchGate*, June 2019.

"What is International Humanitarian Law?" *International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)*, 5 July 2022, www.icrc.org/en/document/international-humanitarian-law.

Uchendu, Egodi. *Women and Conflict in the Nigerian Civil War*. Africa Research and Publications, 2007.

Corresponding Author: Amrita Singh (Research scholar)
E-mail: anvikavatsa.2010@gmail.com
Received: 12 April, 2025; Accepted: 24 April, 2025. Available online: 30 April, 2025
Published by SAFE. (Society for Academic Facilitation and Extension)