

Writing Down the War: The Child's Perspective

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ÖZET Bu araştırma, Lloyd Jones'ın *Mister Pip* (2006) ve Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie'nin *Half of a Yellow Sun* adlı iki çağdaş roman üzerine yoğunlaşmaktadır. Arka planlarında bir iç savaş bulunan bu eserleri ele alan bu çalışma, geniş anlamıyla, son yıllarda önem kazanan bir tür olarak ortaya çıkan bir travma kurmacasıdır. Her iki roman da, Yirminci Yüzyıl'da var olan savaşları, bu savaşlara neden olan anlaşmazlıklar ele almaktadır ve içlerinde insanların nasıl öldürülüklere dair açık ve net betimlemeler bulunmaktadır. Söz konusu romanlar, yazarlarının da savaş konusundaki bakış açlarını, ayrıca, dile getirmektedirler. Romanlarda, savaş nedeniyle travmaya uğrayan, savaşmaya ve strateji geliştirmeye zorlanan çocukların durumu, onların karabasanlarla dolu savaş deneyimleri irdelemektedir. Yaşıdıkları korkunç olaylar nedeniyle dönüşüm geçiren çocukların durumunu gözler önüne seren romanların başkışları, hikaye anlatma tekniklerinin gücünü de farkedip kullanarak, okurlarına, bir çocuğun bakış açısından, anlaşılması genellikle zor olan yetişkinler dünyasını tanıtmaktadır.

ANAHTAR KELİMELER savaş, çocuk, travma, hikaye anlatma

ABSTRACT The paper focuses on two contemporary novels both of which are set against the backdrop of a civil war, namely Lloyd Jones' *Mister Pip* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*.¹ It attempts to put the novels into a larger context of trauma fiction, a genre that gained prominence in the last decades. As both novels present different war conflicts of the Twentieth Century century and are full of explicit depictions of people being killed, the paper points to the representation of war and demonstrates how authors approach the topic. A special attention is paid to traumatized children who are forced to battle with nightmarish images and the strategies they use to come into terms with their war experiences. Transformed by the horrific events in their lives, the novels' protagonists discover the power of storytelling and thus provide the readers with a child's perspective on the, often incomprehensible, world of the adults.

KEYWORDS war, child, trauma, storytelling

WAR AND TRAUMA IN LITERATURE

Writers and readers alike have been fascinated with wars, battles and heroic endeavours of fearless warriors from time memorial. From Homer's Iliad, depicting the ferocity of the Trojan War, to the writers of the Lost Generation and Holocaust testifiers, war can be easily considered an ever-present theme in world literature. Although throughout the centuries the focus shifted from dauntless heroes to ordinary men, war narratives, whether captured in epics, memoirs or novels, have always found an eager readership. The rise of the so called trauma fiction in recent years (together with the

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1. Lloyd Jones, *Mr Pip* (London: John Murray, 2008); Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun* (London: Harper Perennial, 2007).

whole field of trauma theory) and its popularity among the readership only manifest the continuing public enchantment with the *unnarratable*. As Nancy K. Miller and Jason Tougal suggest, in their introduction to the volume *Extremities*, “a reader’s involvement with the painful details of another’s story entails both the pleasures of the imagination and the defenses of personal boundaries.”² It is the pull of these conflicting and ambivalent emotions that draws readers to such stories while they, at the same time, wish to look away.

Yet even though there is an undeniable fascination with narratives capturing the extreme physical and psychical strains war puts on individuals and the, often unspeakable, human suffering, the topic is, undoubtedly, not an easy issue to handle. As “trauma comprises an event or experience which overwhelms the individual and resists language or representation,”³ the very process of writing trauma down becomes entangled with the problematic dynamics between the traumatic experience itself and the way of representing it on paper. The complexity of this process then forces writers to search for new ways of artistic expression while necessarily impacting the very form of the novel. As proved by numerous literary examples from contemporary fiction, embracing trauma in literature requires a special mode of storytelling. More often than not, novelists mimic the forms and symptoms of trauma, “so that temporality and chronology collapse, and narratives are characterised by repetition and indirection.”⁴ The interplay between the subject and the form thus posit a particular challenge for both writers and readers of this type of literature.

In addition, trauma, formerly a subject of medical and scientific discourse, has moved uncompromisingly into the territory of fictional realm and, inevitably, to literary studies as well. Despite a strong wave of disagreement from the so called literary purists, who wish to limit literary discussions to aesthetic qualities of literary texts, trauma fiction foregrounds interdisciplinary character of contemporary literature (and of literary criticism as well). In fact, the very material and structure of these types of texts (and of war narratives specifically) do not enable a simplistic reading. One has to take into account numerous tensions enhanced in them, ranging from the actual historical event and its intricate literary representation to the generic peculiarities and the hybridized character of these narratives. In other words, by supplementing the official, predominantly factual sources,

2. Nancy K. Miller and Jason Tougal (eds.), *Extremities, Trauma, Testimony and Community*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002).

3. Anne Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004).

4. Anne Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*.

novels about war often have a documentary character since they are based on factual information. On the other hand, they also function as works of art which are built upon and set in imaginary landscapes. They fictionalize the complicated internal processes induced by the war events which often stand at the core of the narrative. To limit the reading of such complex narratives solely to their aesthetic principle (although they do matter significantly), would be rather restricting.

The inevitable tension between fiction and fact is complicated even more when one decides to recount the war narrative, often seen as the *unpresentable*, through a child's perspective. The viewpoint of the child shifts the whole discourse since children possess sensibilities that are often lost in adults. Moreover, there is something symbolic about the childhood period which may be considered, as Kate Douglas suggests, in her book *Contesting Childhood: Autobiography, Trauma and Memory*, "synecdoche for history – a means for explaining and interpreting the past, revising and correcting the mistakes of history."⁵ At the same time, it "continues to be a symbol of the future and its potential."⁶ Therefore, war narratives as related by children or from their perspective gain a much significant potency.

As far as literature is concerned, the representation and articulation of children's experience of war atrocities have long ceased to be a taboo topic. To assume that children or teenagers are too young to comprehend the complexities of political turmoil, and war conflicts specifically, would be far from the truth. The diary of Anne Frank, one of the crucial texts in understanding the child's perspective on war, unfolds a unique story of a young girl whose ruminations on the drastic changes the war had brought into her life touched millions of readers all over the world. Several decades later, Zlata Filipović, an eleven-year-old girl living in Sarajevo, also recorded the changing pace of her life in her diary. When war had broken out in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1992, Zlata captured all her emotions and fears on paper and the reader is thus provided with a first-hand account of the consequences of a war conflict. *Zlata's Diary*, published in 1993, has become an international bestseller, with Zlata referred to as the Anne Frank of Sarajevo. Similarly, Vesna Maric, who was only four years older than Zlata, revisited her recollections of the conflict in her memoir *Bluebird*, published by Granta in 2009. All these narratives document the urgent need of young people to record their own thoughts on the often

5. Kate Douglas, *Contesting Childhood: Autobiography, Trauma and Memory*, (London: The Rutgers University Press, 2010).

6. Kate Douglas, *Contesting Childhood: Autobiography, Trauma and Memory*,

incomprehensible events happening around them and their insights are sometimes far more meaningful than those of the adults.

The captivating stories, and voices, of children or young people have found a decent place in the realm of fictional worlds as well. To name just a few, Markus Zusak's bestselling novel *The Book Thief* portrays the story of Liesel Meminger, a young girl living in Nazi Germany who faces the brutality of those in power first-hand, and mediates it through the voice of Death himself. Michael Morpurgo's *Private Peaceful* recounts the childhood memories of a young First World War soldier while *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* by John Boyne documents an unusual friendship between a nine-year old Bruno, the son of a Nazi officer in Auschwitz, and Schmuel, a Jewish boy imprisoned in the camp. *Half of a Yellow Sun*, written by the Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Lloyd Jones' *Mister Pip* also contribute to the discourse by providing poignant and painful accounts of two 20th-century civil wars. Though the wars broke out in different regions of the world and were fuelled by different conflicts, both narratives are tied by a certain degree of universality which this paper seeks to explore.

THROUGH THE EYES OF CHILDREN: CIVIL WARS AND TRAUMA

Based on a historical account of the Nigeria-Biafra war of 1967-70, *Half of a Yellow Sun* recounts the individual narratives and traumas of people involved in the conflict caused by the tribal resentments between Igbo and Hausa peoples. Even though Adichie's novel is not intended at young readers, the perspective of a young boy and his experience during the war represents an essential part of the narrative. The text oscillates between the lives of three characters – Olanna, an upper-class teacher at Nsukka University; Richard, a British journalist and a great admirer of Igbo culture who falls in love with Olanna's twin sister Kainene and Ugwu, a teenage houseboy of Olanna's lover Odenigbo, a free-thinking professor of mathematics. It is precisely Ugwu's part of the narrative that is of vital importance within this discourse.

Ugwu, a thirteen-year-old houseboy, works for Olanna's intellectual lover Odenigbo, a professor of mathematics at the university of Nsukka. He is obviously a poor, uneducated village boy whose ideas about world are rather naïve and incomplete, as shaped by his limited life experience. Yet soon enough, due to the highly intellectual and stimulating environment, he is transformed into a careful observer and his sharp intelligence and ability to learn quickly help him to mature. Because of the lack of money

in his family and also because of the cultural traditions which force boys to mature early, Ugwu's teenage years are already filled with work rather than play. Responsibility, instead of carelessness and fooling around, common for most of the boys his age around the world, is what is asked of him. With the arrival of war, however, the young boy is cast into a whirlwind of actions that have nothing to do with innocent games.

The guileless boy from the novel's beginning is conscripted as a soldier and thus becomes directly involved in the war atrocities, earning his nickname Target Destroyer. Together with his fellow child soldiers who are deprived of their identity and are referred to only as Kill and Go and High-Tech, Ugwu fights against the vandals. His transition from village life to the intellectual stimuli of Odenigbo's house and then to the crude life of a child soldier could not have been more dramatic. The rape of a bar girl, a crucial turning point in Ugwu's transformation, releases a rumbling wave of self-loathing which forces him to unwrap his mind from his body.⁷ The gruesome consequences of this incident become fully clear to him when he finds out that his sister Anulika was also raped during the war. In this context, the archetypal notion of a child as an embodiment of innocence and purity is challenged to a great extent.

Since Adichie did not aim her novel at young readers predominantly, she does not employ any special techniques in her text to soften the impact of the horrors her characters have to go through. In fact, in an attempt to present the conflict as truthfully as possible, the author verbalizes its destructive force and its sweeping consequences, both material and mental, through a powerfully vivid imagery. The haunting images of a severed child's head in her mother's calabash, of people being killed by flying pieces of shrapnel, brutal rapes and murders of (pregnant) women or the terrifying scene of mass killing of Igbo people at the airport (as witnessed by Richard) stay with the characters, and readers as well, long afterwards. The brutality of the novel's imagery is striking, manifesting the extensive force of war atrocities.

Ugwu, who was directly involved in the killings and fighting which, as exemplified, are portrayed in the text quite explicitly, has to struggle with disturbing visions as he is not able to clear his mind of the battlefield scenes. The traumatic experience he had to go through "assumes a haunting quality, continuing to possess [him] with its insistent repetitions and returns."⁸ The recurring images of battlefield scenes, vivid as if experienced anew, only magnify his suffering. "The ka-ka-ka of shooting, the cries of men, the smell of

7. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun*.

8. Anne Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*.

death, the blasts of explosions above and around him were distant. But back at the camp his memory became clear; he remembered the man who placed both hands on his blown-open belly as though to hold his intestines in, the one who mumbled something about his son before he stiffened. And, after each operation, everything became new.”⁹

As seen from the quotation above, “trauma does not lie in the possession of the individual, to be recounted at will, but rather acts as a haunting or possessive influence which not only insistently and intrusively returns but is, moreover, experienced for the first time only in its belated repetition.”¹⁰ It is obvious that Ugwu does not exercise any control over his traumatic experience as its force possesses and seizes him completely against his will. It is the recurring image of the bar girl he raped as Target Destroyer and the silent hate in her eyes that revisits him again and again and eventually leads to his decision to atone for his deeds as a soldier. It is clear that his forced maturing has deprived him of a carefree childhood and inevitably transformed his outlook on life as well.

The protagonist of Lloyd Jones’ novel *Mister Pip* Matilda, also thirteen, lives in Bougainville, a tropical island of Papua New Guinea that was struck by a civil war in 1990. Although Ugwu and Matilda are of the same age at the beginning of their stories, Matilda’s vision of the world and her convincing first-person narrative echo the world of childhood much strongly than that of Ugwu. Her simplistic vision of the world she lives in and her naïve, yet touching attempts to understand the changes happening on the island, resemble the musings of a careless teenage girl much more than Ugwu’s preoccupation with his household responsibilities. Yet, like Ugwu, Matilda is hurled into a changing world where helicopters fly over the island on a daily basis, the jungle spits out drunken rebels or government soldiers, the gunfire merges with “the background chorus of the grunting pigs and shrieking birds”¹¹ and blockades deprive people of food supplies.

Unlike in *Half of a Yellow Sun* where the reality of war occupies the central space of the narrative, Jones’ novel *Mister Pip*, despite the fact that it takes place during a civil war, manages to keep the daily life of its characters in a mode of relative normalcy. The brutalities of war escalate only in the last part of the novel. In order to protect their children, parents attempt to preserve the comfortable daily routine and continue to live their lives as they did before the war. However, children prove to be sensitive beings since they

9. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun*.

10. Anne Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*.

11. Lloyd Jones, *Mr Pip*.

manage to grasp the seriousness of the situation, albeit intuitively. “[W]henever us kids strayed into range our mums and dads would stop talking, and so we knew, didn’t we, that there was some fresh atrocity, the details we didn’t yet know about.”¹² For Matilda, the clinging to everything old, known and thus safe feels strange, “as if [they] were trying to squeeze into an old life that didn’t exist anymore, at least not in the way [they] remembered.”¹³

As all teachers have fled the island, the school is closed until Mr Watts, the only white man left in Bougainville, offers to run the school himself. Nicknamed Pop Eye because of his eyes sticking out “like they wanted to leave the surface of his face,”¹⁴ Mr Watts becomes the central person in the children’s lives. In fact, most of the narrative is focused on the classroom episodes where he attempts to pass his knowledge of the world, although limited, to his eager pupils. His decision to share a story by his favourite writer, Charles Dickens, with his class proves to be, literally, life-changing. Even though Victorian England of Dickens’ *Great Expectations* is seemingly as remote to the reality of Matilda’s tropical island as possible, the young girl manages to find numerous parallels and commonalities between her and Pip, the protagonist of the novel.

In words of Irina Bauder-Begerow, “Pip’s socially marginalised background finds a strong echo in the heroine’s secluded island life” as the story of the young orphan provides her with hope for a better future.¹⁵ The children become so absorbed in the story that the reality of war is forgotten not only in the realm of the classroom but also outside it as they constantly muse on Pip’s adventures. In fact, as Matilda notes, “Mr Watts had given us kids another piece of the world. [...] We could escape to another place.”¹⁶ Thus, the book serves as an ideal escapist medium which transports children from the crude reality of civil war into an imaginary world. ”It was always a relief to return to *Great Expectations*. It contained a world that was whole and made sense, unlike ours.”¹⁷

Yet as the political situation on the island starts to worsen, so does the novel’s imagery. The narrative fills with the atmosphere of tension and fear as both rebels and the redskin soldiers come out of jungle and pester the villagers. Clearly, the slowly accumulating

12. Lloyd Jones, *Mr Pip*.

13. Lloyd Jones, *Mr Pip*.

14. Lloyd Jones, *Mr Pip*.

15. Irina Bauder-Begerow, “Echoing Dickens: Three Rewritings of Great Expectations”, in Sarah Säckel, Walter Göbel and Noha Hamdy (eds.), *Semiotic Encounters. Text, Image and Trans-nation* (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, B.V., 2009), pp.119-135.

16. Lloyd Jones, *Mr Pip*.

17. Lloyd Jones, *Mr Pip*.

suspense is bound to escalate as the lyrical quality of Jones' writing is gradually supplanted by nightmarish images of war brutality, recounted in a numbing simplicity. Through a series of misunderstandings, Mr Watts becomes the target of the soldiers' anger which results in his brutal murder, observed by all the villagers, including children. Such a traumatic experience cannot leave anyone unscathed. "As we watched the soldiers and the Rambo disappear I remember feeling preternaturally calm. This is what deep, deep fear does to you. It turns you into a state of unfeeling."¹⁸

Matilda's recollection, now preserved in form of her memoir, is overly simplistic, yet totally terrifying. "I am unexcited as I remember this; my body no longer shakes. I no longer feel physically ill [...] At the time, though, well, that is a different story. I suppose I was in shock."¹⁹ After watching the dismemberment of Mr Watt's body and other villagers, including her friend Daniel, being dragged to the jungle and killed, Matilda has to face the worst of her nightmares. Her own mother is being raped in front of her eyes and then killed. The excruciating brutality of the novel's final chapters contrasts sharply with the dreamy atmosphere of Matilda's previous escapes into Pip's world.

WRITING DOWN THE WAR: THE HEALING POWERS OF STORYTELLING

What ties these narratives together is the struggles of their young protagonists to come into terms with their traumatic experiences. Both Adichie and Lloyd point to the devastating effect of war atrocities on the individuals who witnessed them as they seek to process the horrors of war. Interestingly, both novels point to the therapeutic power of storytelling (or writing) which the protagonists of the abovementioned novels turn to. While being imprisoned by the painful memories and haunting images in a certain limbo, with time, the survivors seek out a proactive approach to their past that could eventually lift its burden. By offering testimonies on the events witnessed first-hand, the characters choose to testify to the values of knowledge and humanity that might lead to empowerment.

In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, the traumatic events and memories burden the young boy to such an extent that they leave him impotent. For a while, Ugwu, similarly to other characters in the book (especially Olanna and Richard), is unable to process them, the psychic remnants of the horrors being too vivid and terrifying. His trauma registers the

18. Lloyd Jones, *Mr Pip*.

19. Lloyd Jones, *Mr Pip*.

force of his experience that is not yet fully owned.²⁰ The intrusive images and memories keep resurfacing again and again, rendering the return to normalcy impossible. Only with time, the decision to come into terms with these events in form of a book ripens in Ugwu. Clearly, Adichie accentuates the therapeutic effect of storytelling as it seems to empower “survivors to gain more control over the traces left by trauma.”²¹

Snippets of *The World Was Silent When We Died* occur throughout the text from its opening chapters although its author is revealed only at the end of the book. Ugwu’s perspective is thus not limited to the third person narration only; he is given his own voice in order to present his account of the war. While his writing, based on his own experience, observations and overheard conversations, helps him to heal emotionally (since it also functions as an act of expiation), it has a documentary character as well. Ugwu’s memoir captures the collective memory of Igbo people with his voice firmly controlling the narrative. As Cathy Caruth states in her book *Trauma: Explorations of Memory* the traumatized “carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves symptoms of a history that they cannot entirely possess.”²²

In *Mister Pip*, the traumatic experience, like in Ugwu’s case, is locked in the memory, with the child being unable to process it. Only years later, now as an adult woman, Matilda decides to “write these things down, so [she] can move on.”²³ While the stories served as escapist mediums at first, they are later transformed into a tool of self-empowerment. It is then through her retrospective rendering of these events that the reader perceives the story. Random references to Matilda’s future which are scattered across the novel, then, inform the reader of the heroine’s well-being which may also function as a softening technique aimed at a young recipient. “[T]ransforming memory into a coherent narrative that can then be integrated into the survivor’s sense of self and

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- 20. Cathy Caruth (ed.), *Trauma, Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).
 - 21. Susan J. Brison, “Trauma Narratives and the Remaking of the Self”, in Mieke Bal, Jonathan V. Crewe and Leo. Spitzer (eds.) *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1999), pp.39-54. In fact, the primary impetus for writing a book about the war and the tribal resentments between Igbo and Hausa peoples was Adichie’s need “to engage with [her] history in order to make sense of [her] present” (the P.S.). Even though she has not experienced the conflict herself, Adichie stated several times that she regarded the war not as a history but as a memory. With members of her own family being traumatized and haunted by the shadows of the war, Adichie felt an urgent need to reconstruct the destinies of ordinary people in a written form and thus reconcile with the traumatic legacy of her ancestors.
 - 22. Cathy Caruth (ed.), *Trauma. Explorations in Memory*.
 - 23. Lloyd Jones, *Mr Pip*, pp.179

view of the world”²⁴ thus enables both Matilda and Ugwu to reach reconciliation with their traumatic experience.

Although fictional, these personal narratives obviously operate within a much larger context. The traumatic remembering, captured in novels about war conflicts, often seeks to destabilize the so called grandnarrative of the war, as produced by politicians, mass media or history books. History, as Alena Smiešková claims, is “no longer viewed as a sum of undoubted facts” but is rather “contaminated by the process of subjectivization.”²⁵ Literary texts then provide an alternative rendering of certain historical moments and should be seen as “equally important to reconstruct what we understand as personal or national history.”²⁶ They attempt to preserve the personal and collective memory from repression or misrepresentation while capturing voices that might otherwise go unnoticed.

To conclude, “writing about trauma moves personal experience onto the historical stage, it provides a way to reconceive the relation between private and public, and it produces a counter-discourse to the historical meeting or erasure of the kinds of violence that have been regarded as violating dominant cultural norms and narratives,” as Leigh aroves.²⁷ These novels therefore demonstrate the potential of literature to “suggest what is inaccessible, unbelievable, and elusive about traumatic experience.”²⁸ Moreover, they prove that in the chaotic and incomprehensible time of war, a coherent narrative is desperately needed. While the characters lose their faith and are shocked by the cruelties man is capable of, it is the power of a story which rescues humanity.

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