

April 2017

## The Motionless Half-Sun Over the Postcolonial Horizon: Adichie, Bhabha, and Inaction

Thermal I. Ellawala 2896594

*Clark University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.clarku.edu/surj>

 Part of the [Other English Language and Literature Commons](#), and the [Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Ellawala, Thermal I. 2896594 (2017) "The Motionless Half-Sun Over the Postcolonial Horizon: Adichie, Bhabha, and Inaction," *Scholarly Undergraduate Research Journal at Clark*: Vol. 3 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://commons.clarku.edu/surj/vol3/iss1/3>

This Manuscript is brought to you for free and open access by the Scholarly Collections & Academic Work at Clark Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Scholarly Undergraduate Research Journal at Clark by an authorized editor of Clark Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [mkrikonis@clarku.edu](mailto:mkrikonis@clarku.edu), [jodolan@clarku.edu](mailto:jodolan@clarku.edu).

---

# The Motionless Half-Sun Over the Postcolonial Horizon: Adichie, Bhabha, and Inaction

## **Cover Page Footnote**

I would like to thank Prof. Stephen Levin who cultivated my interest in Postcolonial Theory and Literary Theory, and who inspired this particular line of inquiry. My thanks also go to Prof. Olga Litvak, for her insightful comments and critiques.

# The Motionless Half-Sun Over the Postcolonial Horizon: Adichie, Bhabha, and Inaction

Themal Ellawala '17 | Psychology



## ABSTRACT

Action is a metaphysical reality of our daily existence, one so commonplace and privileged that it has transcended its dialectical relationship with inaction to a position of primacy. The latter has failed to capture the imagination of philosophers and critical theorists, leaving the subversive potential of this negative space unexplored. This essay seeks to interrogate the space of inaction, and restore unity within this duality. This exploration is situated in a postcolonial context, as a conversation between Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* and Homi Bhabha, to examine how inaction offers a site from which we can begin to challenge the violence of action and the unitary discourse of nationhood. What potential does inaction hold to resignify nationhood? How does it create the psychic space to (re)imagine nationhood as narrative, and situate it within the temporality of modernity? How does the figure of inaction inform the discourse of postcolonial nationhood? These are some of the questions that preoccupy the author and this work.

\* *This piece contains brief discussions of war-time violence.*

In his introduction to a collection of essays titled *Nation and Narration*, postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha poses at the end a series of questions that seem fundamental to the field of postcolonial studies and many other fields of critical inquiry, questions that have plagued the haphazardly engineered project of nationhood and nationalism since its inception. He asks: "When did we become 'a people'? When did we stop being one? Or are we in the process of becoming one? What do these big questions have to do with our intimate relationships with each other and with others?" (7). Questions of belonging, of inside and outside, of inclusion of race, gender, class, sexuality, and diasporic positionalities lie central to the articulations of nationness, and are raised when drawing national boundaries of geographic, cultural, and psychological proportions. The present work begins at this poignant close,

seeking not a conclusive resolution to these matters but to extend this line of inquiry further.

Much of the discourse of nationhood focuses on doing – of articulating a national identity, performing, rationalizing, and assimilating. The resistance to unitary, totalizing iterations of national identity are predicated upon forms of action as well. History serves as a testament to these forms of resistance – of splintering, factionalizing, secession, and conflict – as kinetic modes of self-expressions. The course of human development indicates a definite privileging of action in its violent and redemptive multiplicities. In contrast, negative spaces such as inaction have garnered little attention. Inaction tends to be conflated with apathy and disinterest, and its subversive potential is yet to be interrogated in a meaningful way.

What is lost in this privileging of action is the radical potential of inaction and its

capacity to resist colonial discourses and violence.

Continuing a tradition of feminist scholarship (Das 1996, Menon and Bhasin 1996, Suarez-Orzoco 1992), Kalpana Rahita Seshadri has demonstrated in *HumAnimal: Race, Law, Language* how silences can be read as more meaningful than mere privations of speech, as spaces in which the powers of discourse are neutralized (34). I endeavor to apply this same revisionist thinking to the metaphysical concept of inaction, resignifying this hitherto meaningless blank space as one teeming with the potential for subversion. The postcolonial dimensions and implications of this question bring me to Chimamanda Adichie's novel *Half of a Yellow Sun*, to interrogate the multiple, hidden presences of inaction in this text and what effect it has upon the Nigerian and Biafran project. Indeed the theatre of post-independence Nigeria presents an insightful

glimpse of the destructive potential of action when sundered from the meditative capacities of inaction. Ultimately, this work is a conversation between Adichie and Bhabha, between the postcolonial moment Adichie illustrates in her novel and the theory Bhabha expounds in texts such as in *Nation and Narration*, *Locations of Culture*, and *DissemiNation?*. This critical exploration arises from the nexus of these two interlocutors and their texts, yet it bears the potential to contribute something novel in its own right, for the resignification of inaction is not an explicit theme in Adichie's political novel nor in Bhabha's preoccupation with the problems of nationhood. Thus, the present work offers a new optic for the reading of both authors and their works. In the subsequent sections I will introduce the reader to Adichie's and Bhabha's texts, offer a conceptualization of action and inaction, and interrogate moments of action and inaction respectively in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, paying close attention to how these interpretations relate to Bhabha's theorization of nation as narration.

*Half of a Yellow Sun* embodies the ethic of the personal as the political, weaving together the drama of private lives with the narrative of upheavals Nigeria experienced post-independence. The text follows the journeys of Olanna and Kainene, twin sisters and the daughters of a wealthy business tycoon. Olanna rejects her family background of political machinations and capitalist scheming to live with Odenigbo, an intellectual and a revolutionary, in Nsukka. Ugwu arrives at Odenigbo's house as a thirteen

year old domestic servant, and stays with them for the better part of the novel. This action occurs against the backdrop of rising ethnic tensions in Nigeria, which gained independence from the British in 1960. Much of this friction is centered within the relationship between the mostly Christian Igbo people of the South and the Muslim Hausa of the North, who are divided along ethnic and religious lines. Following decades of the "divide and conquer" politics of British rule, Igbo people chafe under a Northerner-dominated federal government, which leads to a military coup that installs Igbo military leaders in power, later dubbed the Igbo coup. This is soon followed by a counter-coup, with Hausa factions in the military assuming power and killing Igbo people in the process. This sparks waves of killings across the country, with the Hausa killing Igbo in cities like Kano, and the Igbo retaliating against the Hausa and other ethnic groups. Olanna witnesses the massacre of Kano, where her entire extended family is murdered, and is only saved from violence herself due to the help of her ex-lover, the Hausa Mohammed.

Nsukka, an Igbo-dominated city, is sheltered from the ethnic violence that has swept the country. Given its revolutionary character, it serves as a site for the burgeoning Igbo secession movement, which seeks to declare an independent Igbo state called Biafra. Led by Colonel Ojukwu, the Biafran army engages the federal government over a period of three years, leading to the loss of countless lives, large-scale property destruction, and severe famine. Ugwu is forcibly conscripted to

the Biafran army, an experience which affects him deeply, as is demonstrated by his rape of a young woman during the height of the war. Kainene, too, is moved by the cataclysms of the war, abandoning her war profiteering ways to operate a refugee camp for those displaced by the war.

Through a scattered collection of writings in *Nation and Narration*, *Locations of Culture*, and *DissemiNation?* Bhabha suggests an optic for critiquing the project of the nation, long considered a fraught and contested site by postcolonial theorists. Taken together, these texts raise critical questions about how the modern nation-state accommodates diverse peoples and differences. Of significance to Bhabha is the capacity of the state to collapse such differences into a singular entity, one that is often remarkably similar to the identity of those that maintain power (*DissemiNation?* 1999). In addition, Bhabha is perturbed by the tendency to treat social locations (e.g. gender, race, class) as singularities that are universalized and totalized across a range of peoples, eliding meaningful individual differences within each site (Introduction: *Locations of Culture*). Indeed, Bhabha's concerns can be summarized as a wariness of naming the subject, thereby limiting it and displacing those that seek to belong in it. This phenomenon can then be traced to their results of silencing through disenfranchisement and violence that accompanies questions of national belonging. Instead, Bhabha argues, we must approach the rhetoric of nationalism and the project of the nation as a narrative, one that may prevent foreclosure and is open to (re)

negotiation and (re)interpretation (Introduction: Narrating the Nation). It is through such an optic, he says, that we can acknowledge the constructed nature of the nation, disrupt the linear temporality that accompanies this construction, and conceptualize “in-between spaces” that accommodate those displaced by the singular social locations that the modern national discourse imposes (Introduction: Locations of Culture).

The current work seeks to engage with both Adichie and Bhabha through offering a conceptualization of inaction as a construct that unites the two and their interests in the failure of nation-building. Inaction is characterized by the cessation of motion, yet it is also the womb of future action as it precedes it. The figuring of action and inaction as a neat dichotomy is expeditious and facile, for the two naturally exist in an uninterrupted continuum with one spawning the impulse for the other. Inaction is an awareness of the world, a sensory experience of the external. It is a pause, a stillness of the body, and the disruption of psychic inertia. For the performance of action requires one to first decide, often times prematurely, in favor of a specific thought (or sequence of thoughts) that is transfigured into motive for action. This selection implies the death of the multitude of other thoughts, visions, and realities that could be. Inaction opens the space for the resuscitation of these psychic processes, and the imagining of new possibilities. It is a site for processes of meaning-making, interpretation, and resignification.

A recurring motif

throughout Bhabha's *Nation and Narration* is a pluralism represented by Janus. To early Romans Janus was “the god of the beginnings and the ends, presiding over every entrance and departure, and because every door and passageway looks in two directions, Janus was seen as two-faced or Janus bifrons -- the god who looked both ways” (Wasson). He also represented the duality of the beginnings and ends of conflict, the personification of both war and peace. Therefore, Janus was the embodiment of both motion, or action, that marks beginnings and stillness, an iteration of inaction, that is achieved at the end. The privileging of action cleaves this duality, and the two faces of Janus are sundered in order to venerate the active elements of this persona. It is unsurprising that a people who were as constantly in motion as the Romans – in war, migration, expansion – found little use for the worship of inaction (Broadhead). The symbolism of a cleaved duality appears throughout Adichie's text, figured most prominently in the motif of beheading. Even the symbology of the Biafran flag, which bears a halved sun, speaks to a wholeness that has been sundered – resonant with the plight of inaction both in the novel and the postcolonial condition.

Inaction bears a plethora of iterations – paralysis, listlessness, and passive resistance. This exercise of categorization is contrived, for these states may often co-exist and occur simultaneously. However, the focus of this essay is passive resistance, the capacity inaction bears to resist and reject the singular vision of action and its violent realities. What potential does inaction hold to contribute

to Bhabha's project of resignifying nationhood, as outlined in *Nation and Narration*, *Locations of Culture*, and *DissemiNation*? How does it create the psychic space to (re)imagine nationhood as narrative? How does the figure of inaction inform the discourse of postcolonial nationhood? These are some of the questions that inform this essay.

#### ACTION AS DESTRUCTION

One of the many dangers of the kinesthetic facilities of the body lies in its ability to rehearse centuries-old scripts of violence. Similarly, Adichie's commentary on the Biafran war of 1967-70 to gain independence from the Nigerian state is a narrative that is saturated with action that reinscribes colonial violence. “The fantasy of the native is precisely to occupy the master's place while keeping his place in the slave's avenging anger,” Bhabha says, illustrating the spirit of identification and possession that haunts the relationship between the Colonizer and the Colonized, with the former seeking to possess the latter and the Colonized desiring the power and status of the Colonizer (Remembering Fanon, xxviii). It is this very phenomenon that has contributed to the lamentable phenomenon of postcolonial states and actors performing colonial violence while repudiating colonial authority. This is all too evident in the Biafran secession project, doubly reprehensible considering its radical rupture from British colonialism and the colonial-style regime of independent Nigeria. Their use of child labor, with “children forced into a truck by soldiers and returned at night with their palms chafed and

bleeding from grinding cassava” (329), echoes the capitalist labor exploitation of the colonial epoch, such as in Colonial Zimbabwe where “African children were a ready-made source of cheap labor that could be harnessed to the capitalist transformation of the new colony” (Grier 34). The colonial ethic of exploiting alterity is all too present in this secession enterprise. Examples of the Biafran militia plundering the relief rations meant for refugees or its leader Ojukwu manipulating the propagandistic rhetoric of saboteurs to root out dissidents speaks to the corruption of the fledgling Biafran state, which mirror the policies of their British rulers and the post-independence government of Nigeria. Biafra was meant to be a symbol of the liberation of all of Black Africa, and yet it too enslaved thousands and sacrificed millions in its doomed quest.

One of the most significant aspects of this replication of colonial dominance is in the ethno-nationalism that the discourse of Biafran statehood (in) cites. References to the purity of the Igbo people, the ethnic identity of Biafra, abound, which are contrasted with the “vandals” (the Muslim Hausa) and “saboteurs” (other minorities). Even the principal characters, such as Olanna, her husband Odenigbo, and their houseboy Ugwu are enmeshed in the violence of ethno-nationalism, for their Igbo identity is constructed in opposition to the other ethnicities. The conversation between Olanna and Ugwu of the first military coup, in which Ugwu ends with “we are not like those Hausa people” (222) is repeated in the more heated exchange

between Olanna and Odenigbo about Mohammed, Olanna’s friend and former lover, in which he states that Mohammed, the “bloody Muslim Hausa man... is complicit, absolutely complicit, in everything that happened to our people” (238). Both Ugwu and Odenigbo seem perfectly capable of rehearsing and performing Igbo scripts of ethno-nationalism, demonstrating that this ethno-fascist fervor transcends differences in social class and formal education. Essentializing forces operate in this appeal to an ethnically homogenous, “pure” state, constructing significant divisions based purely on one’s birth and spoken tongue. The fact that Mohammed saved Olanna during the Hausa riots, at the risk of his own life, does not figure in Odenigbo’s scathing denunciation, nor the sheer reality of the Igbo-led reprisal attacks against the Hausa in Ugwu’s estimation of the Igbo. Reality, with its complexities and subjectivities, has no place in this nationalistic rhetoric. Rather, this rhetoric is predicated upon dualisms of good/bad and insider/outsider, with a mythic understanding of what constitutes each. Adichie gestures towards the colonial origins of this phenomenon, with a discussion at the onset of the novel of the British policy of divide and rule that pitted the Hausas against the Igbo.

This reductive, essentializing, totalizing vision of nationhood is what Bhabha attempts to dismantle through his emphasis on the constructed nature of the nation. He suggest the dangers of imbibing “the many as one” mythos of nationhood, stating “we may begin by questioning that progressive metaphor of

modern social cohesion - the many as one - shared by organic theories of the holism of culture and community, and by theorists who treat gender, class or race as social totalities that are expressive of unitary collective experiences” (DissemiNation 212). This skepticism of “unitary collective experiences” and “modern social cohesion” is what leads Bhabha on the path to reinterpreting nationhood as a narrative. Such an interpretation of nationhood resists the “authoritarian, ‘normalizing’ tendencies within cultures in the name of the national interest or the ethnic prerogative” (Introduction: Narrating the Nation 4). The violence perpetuated by both the Hausa and the Igbo retells this narrative of an ethnically bound state, a unitary experience of ethnicity, gender, and other social orientations imposed by the discourse of the nation and nationalism.

The violence of such nationalist dogma is only realized when thought turns to deed. In his seminal work on postcolonial identities in India and Sri Lanka, *Postcolonial Insecurities*, Krishna explores the dangers of the embodiment of abstraction. Modernity, he states “is the disciplining of ambiguity and an intolerance for multiple or layered notions of identity, territory, and sovereignty, citizenship is invariably an either-or matter” (32). This relates to Bhabha’s theorization of nationhood that is predicated upon the articulation of singular social locations that can be represented as “unitary collective experiences,” as discussed earlier. In this site of intolerance for ambiguity and diversity, ideologies of ethno-

nationalism can often inspire violence, as the postcolonial history of many states can attest. However, in quoting Henri Lefebvre, he says this violence “does not stem from some force intervening aside from rationality, outside or beyond it. Rather, it manifests itself from the moment any action introduces the rational into the real, from the outside, by means of tools which strike, slice and cut—and keep doing so until the purpose of their aggression is achieved” (32). Communal violence in the postcolonial state is a product of reductionist abstraction turned action, or a(bstra)ction, and cannot be attributed solely to the first.

What is intrinsically violent about action? The problematics of action lie in its bounded nature and the uncertainty that marks it. Action is limited to the bodily capacities of the actor, by the kinesthetic faculties, muscle memory, and spatial awareness of the individual. It is restricted by the social conventions that render it readable to the external world. Actions are not performed in a vacuum, and thus the regulatory powers of the social sphere govern it, even what is intended to be subversive motion. The actor frequently experiences difficulty in translating the expansive universe of the psyche, with its untold multitudes, into the diminished modalities of speech and corporality. Upon performing the action, ambiguity shrouds its result. Bhabha speaks of action that seems “somehow beyond control” and quotes Hannah Arendt’s suggestion “that the author of social action may be the initiator of its unique meaning, but as agent...cannot control its outcome” (Locations of culture

12-13). One needs to look no further than the response to the second military coup in Adichie’s text, the ethnic violence directed at the Igbo people, or the Igbo response to this in the form of a civil war to understand how Adichie’s novel manifests this uncertain quality of action.

Action is synonymous with violence in Adichie’s text. Even the actions that resist the reductionist abstractions, the homogenizing discourses of nationhood, appear to inscribe violence. For instance, Olanna’s twin Kainene’s reaction to the Igbo refugee woman who spits on the doctor from an ethnic minority group – two hard slaps across the face – is shaped by their class difference, and exemplifies the violence that binds the elite to the proletariat. However, the violence that stems from the ethno-nationalistic paradigm is significantly more damaging and repugnant. Ugwu’s rape of the bar-girl in the height of the war is a testament to this. This section of the narrative contains no sense of stillness or meditation on Ugwu’s part. The scene is a montage of different motions in time played at high speed, which conveys this sense of “beyond control” that Bhabha speaks of in reference to motion. Ugwu’s resistance to the violence is not figured implicitly or explicitly. Instead there lingers a sense of inevitability to the scene. One finds no relief from such grotesque representations of violence in action, but must turn to inaction to find liberation.

#### DISAMBIGUATING INACTION

Inaction has been theorized earlier, but a close reading of the text supplies moments of

stillness that expand and add complexity to the construct. It is inaction that holds the redemptive potential that allows Ugwu to mourn his action, his assault of the bar-girl. He murmurs to himself, in barely perceptible motions “The World Was Silent When We Died. It haunted him, filled him with shame. It made him think about that girl in the bar” (496). It is in moments of hushed murmurs, silence, and interiority that Ugwu finds the capacity to acknowledge his guilt. It is then that he grieves the pain of his victim. Repentance, with its ability to reject the violent narrative of conflict arises not through action but inaction. Inaction possesses a retrospective capacity to resignify events of the past, which bears the ability to redeem the present moment and transform the future. This linking of the three temporal states resists a linear temporality that is assumed by the dominant discourse of nationhood.

The temporal dimensions of inaction can be read throughout Adichie’s narrative. Olanna, as the only character in *Nsukka* who witnessed the violence against the Igbo people firsthand while in Kano, gazes across all temporal dimensions. However, the others in *Nsukka*, where “life was insular and the news was unreal” (168), conceptualize this violence only in abstraction. To them, the violence does not carry the same gravity, the quality of realness that Olanna has experienced. They are able to look squarely into the future. While at the rally held in *Nsukka* to commemorate the birth of the secessionist movement, Odenigbo raises his arm to emphasize the grandiosity of the Biafran future. Olanna sees

this gesture and remembers “how awkwardly twisted Auntie Ifeka’s arm had been” (205), her mind suspended in the past. While Odenigbo and her daughter dance around the room after Ojukwu announces the birth of the free Biafran state, Olanna simply watches on “her mind frozen in the present” (203). While Olanna does not stagnate in these temporalities but bears the ability to look to the future as well, the other characters can only orient themselves to futurity. While other characters do, Olanna observes. Thus, a clear relationship develops between the act of witnessing, especially of violence, and the capacity to traverse various temporal dimensions of past, present, and future.

Bhabha’s theorizing on cultural production bears similar temporal dimensions. In the introduction to *Locations of Culture* he states “the borderline work of culture demands an encounter with ‘newness’ that is not part of the continuum of past and present. It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation. Such art does not merely recall the past as a social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent ‘in-between’ space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present” (7). *Half of a Yellow Sun* develops this idea further, for the remembrance of the past interrupts not simply the present but also the ‘present of the future,’ a temporality that seeks to focus the present moment exclusively on futurity, and is often employed by nationalist discourse to obscure its violence. The project of nationhood always spends the present moment looking to

a golden future, disregarding the exclusions, atrocities, and harsh realities that exist in the now and are prerequisite for a homogenous utopian state. While all of the characters in *Nsukka* embrace a mythologized, abstract vision of a Biafran state of the future, it is those who have witnessed the violence of ethnic conflict who temper this (destructive) ideal. It is figures like Olanna who ‘renew’ the past by rehabilitating it from the debris of memory and weaving it into the present moment. Her presence signifies the refiguring of culture, the emergence of a counter-stance to the insularities of the dominant paradigm of secession, suggesting alternative readings of history and futurity.

Bhabha’s reference to ‘in-between’ spaces relates to his theorizing of interstices in *Locations of Culture*. He posits that society must reject the singularities of social locations such as class or gender, and instead seek interstices that manifest in the moment of the articulation of cultural differences. “These in-between spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself” (*Locations of Culture* 1-2). It is in these interstitial spaces that culture is reinterpreted, and matters of inclusion and exclusion are negotiated. According to Bhabha, it is in “the emergence of interstices – the overlap and displacement of domains of difference – that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated” (*Locations*

of Culture 2). Inaction presents such moments of in-betweenness. As both the moment of birth and death of action, it exists as the space between and around motion and stillness, thought and deed, beginning and ending. The figure of Janus is interstitial in the embodiment of duality. The merging of temporalities, the resignification of culture – all of these phenomena suggest a liminality to inaction. The inaction through which Ugwu repents the sexualized violence he committed inhabits “that gray space between dreaming and daydreaming” (497), illustrating the borderland nature of inaction. It is this collapse of boundaries, the existence outside of and between paradigms that enables one to realize the potential of inaction to unite artificially isolated temporalities, and to resist the homogenizing force of nationhood.

It is to the rejection of nationalist discourse that we arrive at through a close reading of both Olanna and Kainene and the role(s) that they play in the narrative. Here, inaction is a site that is fertile ground for the cultivation of subversion, and for producing narratives that reject the totalizing powers of colonial discourse. If action is that which produces and reinforces discourses of ethno-nationalism that both Ugwu and Odenigbo explicitly cite, it is inaction that positions Olanna to resist these narratives. The two key exchanges on ethno-nationalist discourse in the text, between Olanna and Ugwu and Olanna and Odenigbo, take place after she witnesses the massacre of Kano. Witnessing the brute reality of the violence that the homogenous state – the Hausa nation – must enact in order to



define itself awakens Olanna's sensitivities to the pervasive nature of violence, including the silent violence of the Biafran narrative. It is not action – a state of doing, of motion – that Olanna inhabits in this moment of witnessing violence, but of motionlessness, observation, and inaction. Thus, while Olanna embraces the idea of the Biafran state, she is cautious in accepting its propaganda uncritically. It is through her eyes that the reader is able to discern the inequities, the cruelties, and the miseries that the ethno-nationalism of all factions inspires.

It is her capacity for inaction that enables Olanna to witness this violence, to make it salient to the 'present of the future' space, and reject the ethnic homogenizing powers the culture of Biafra perpetuates. She is able to observe "we are all capable of doing the same things to one another, really" (222). This is an explicit renunciation of the Igbo rhetoric of ethnic purity and chosen status. This is echoed in her defense of Mohammed against Odenigbo's prejudiced overgeneralizations. While Olanna supports the central cause of the secession movement, she repudiates the violence it engenders and is moved to more thoughtful action. It is important to recognize Olanna's Dark Swoops, the trauma-induced mental illness she experiences after witnessing the massacre in Kano, as a state of inaction which, while seemingly an undesirable state of paralysis, creates the space for her to heal and reconcile the many experiences of her past, present, and future. Her Dark Swoops represent a cessation of motion – from the weakness of her limbs to the

inability of her body to control excretory functions. From this state, Olanna appears whole but transformed, with a heightened consciousness that has been explored earlier in this paper. However, there appears a direct connection between this state of inaction and the "actions" of those around her. Adichie states that Olanna's Dark Swoops grew worse during times when her visitors abused the Hausa, deriding them as "the black-as-he-goats Northerners, those dirty cattle-rearers with jigger-infested feet" (198). It is tenable to assume that her state of inaction is poised to reject this binary world view of good Igbo/evil Hausa, and that it labors to rehabilitate Olanna's mind from the violence of dichotomies.

Kainene's narrative follows a similar trajectory. She witnesses the grotesque death of her steward, Ikejide, a moment of inaction that marks her significantly. The text emphasizes the fact that the memory of this incident lingers on, and that it is frequently renewed and rehearsed in her mind. The Kainene that emerges from the inactive moment of witnessing violence is altered significantly. She too is moved to thoughtful, premeditated action. Kainene rejects the classism and corruption that defines the elites of wartime to establish a camp for refugees. She commits her entire being to this project, yet is able to critically examine the discourse of belonging the Biafran state cites. It is through this critical positionality that Kainene opposes the refugee woman who spits on the doctor from an ethnic minority group, rejecting the woman's ethno-nationalist rhetoric of all minorities

being saboteurs and responsible for the evils that have befallen Biafra. While Kainene's reaction cites certain scripts of violence, intimating an intrinsically violent aspect of action, much of what she does comes from a critical positionality, one that attempts to deconstruct all forms of violence. Inaction not only possesses the capacity to be critical of action, but to escape the paralysis that this state may induce by suggesting an alternative space, a way of doing that seeks to minimize the intrinsic violence of action.

The exercise of resignifying nationhood as a continuous and dynamic narrative is what negotiates the porosity of culture and the nation state, Bhabha says. "The problem of outside/inside must always itself be a process of hybridity, incorporating new 'people' in relation to the body politic, generating other sites of meaning and, inevitably, in the political process, producing unmanned sites of political antagonism and unpredictable forces for political representation" (Introduction: Narrating the Nation 4). Narratives possess the spatial capacity to debate questions of belonging and pose alternatives to totalizing myths of citizenship. The figures of Olanna and Kainene strive towards a similar vision, one in which the necessity of violence, irrespective of the actor or the cause, is questioned. In this process of questioning narrative, a new culture emerges. Olanna and Kainene suggest the possibility of a third space, one which rejects the colonizing potential of both the federal government and the Biafran rebels, in which questions of who we are and what binds us together are approached through

new, more inclusive ways.

While moments of inaction could be read as products of subjection or even impotence, it is necessary to be critical of this impulse. For instance, the execution of Nnaemeka, the Igbo security officer at the Kano airport, could be interpreted as a moment of paralysis. His inaction before his Hausa executor could be construed as a passivity that arises from being overwhelmed with fear. However, to read it only in this light is to further disempower the subject, amplifying the violence that is performed upon them. While it is tenable to assume that the paralysis of fear does exist in this moment, the reader must interrogate the figure of inaction to determine what other, potentially subversive, capacities it holds. A reading informed by this aim suggests that the refusal to comply with the Muslim soldier's order to say 'Allahu Akbar' is a sign of passive resistance. It especially rejects the appropriation of religion to justify ethnic violence. Whatever Nnaemeka's intentions may have been – we do not know for the scene is mediated by a white man's narration – the inaction he embodies acquires meaning of its own in the singular moment, representing, among many things, a passive resistance to a project that aims to subjugate and eliminate difference. It can be argued that Nnaemeka's death was inevitable, for his birth and identity mark him irrevocably. In such a context the capacity to confront and defy through passivity is perhaps the only form of empowerment that exists. It is only through the recognition of this defiant nature of inaction that one can recognize multiple

modalities of expression and pluralities of being in this world. Much like Gayatri Spivak argues for the resignification of the Indian independence fighter Bhubaneswari Bhaduri's suicide beyond the gendered narrative of unintended pregnancy, the death of Nnaemeka must be reinterpreted to recognize the capacity of inaction for "disavowal, resistance, displacement, exclusion, and cultural contestation" (Bhabha, Introduction: Narrating the Nation 5). It is only then that we circumvent the reinforcing of alterity, and avoid further silencing the colonial subject.

The severed head is a symbol that appears throughout Adichie's text. Its connection to inaction brings us back to the splitting of Janus, the sundering of action and inaction. The severed head of her daughter that the woman fleeing the massacre of Kano carries in a calabash can be interpreted as a representation of the cerebral state of inaction that is cleaved from the bodily-kinesthetic. Beholding it, Olanna experiences a moment of stillness as she "stare[s] at it for a while" (188). She takes no action taken over the severed head, there is no dramatic reaction to it. While another passenger screams, Olanna stares on, transfixed by the vision before her. The memory lingers on in her mind, for references to this incident appear elsewhere in the book. It is telling that Olanna experiences her first moment of being rooted in the present after witnessing the severed head. It serves as a site for the uniting of temporalities. Similarly, the beheading of the steward Ikejide precedes the transfiguring of Kainene to a state of heightened consciousness. The

motif of the severed head serves to illustrate the violent disassociation of action and inaction, and the destructive potential of action that reigns unchecked by the mediating powers of inaction. However, the symbol of the severed head also carries the potential to reinforce the semantics of inaction, and inspire a shift in belief and consciousness. The severed head seeks completion, a uniting of the body, to make Janus whole again. As two who have experienced the symbolic power of the severed head, Olanna and Kainene perform this labor of merger and regeneration. It is fitting that Olanna and Kainene, twin sisters who are both similar and significantly different from one another, are the sites for the healing of the rupture between the duality of inaction and action.

In its wariness of totalizing epistemologies the present work must tread with caution, for to construct too absolute a position on inaction would be to perpetuate the same epistemic violence. In the interest of exploring certain critical alternatives to the main thrust of this paper, it must be noted that inaction may very well fail to realize its subversive potential, and even replicate forms of violence that action inspires. For instance, when Ugwu attempts to seek sanctuary inside a church to evade the Biafran soldiers who will conscript him, the priest does nothing, thereby denying him assistance. This moment of inaction leaves Ugwu at the mercy of the soldiers, who recruit him forcibly into a bloody and futile war. Thus, at times inaction can aid and abet this program of violence. It is not my aim to totalize inaction to always possess the

capacity, and more importantly realize this potential, to resist colonial discourses. Subjectivities prevail even here. However, what I hope this work demonstrates is the potential inaction holds to be resignified as a site of contestation and passive resistance. Similarly, one can argue that action can reject its destructive potential to be anti-colonial, especially by producing “recesses of the national culture from which alternative constituencies of peoples and oppositional analytic capacities may emerge” (Bhabha, Introduction: Narrating the Nation 3). While this potentiality of action must be acknowledged, we must also bear in mind that such a space of motion is often preceded and mediated by inaction, a site of meditation and reflection. Lastly, I am in no way implying that we must unequivocally condemn the Biafran secession, or at least Adichie’s representation of it. My interests do not lie in passing such value judgments, but in interrogating the capacity that exists in postcolonial self-determination to replicate colonial examples of violence. This begs the question if there is any space that is devoid of the detritus of colonialism, which is incidentally a topic for a different discussion, but the critical consciousness must flourish in order to disturb our complacency in a troubled world.

An attentive study of the figure of inaction serves to inscribe more meaning in this construct than mere apathy or subjection. Negative spaces such as inaction and silence possess immense potential to resist, subvert, and reimagine the nation. Adichie’s generous novel supplies prodigious textual

evidence to substantiate the many capacities of inaction. Inaction provides the psychic terrain for the uniting of temporalities to heal a continuum destroyed by the ‘present of the future’ orientation of the nationalist paradigm. Through inaction, one discovers means of resisting colonial discourses of power and violence, the space to grieve the violence of action, and to conceive conscious and deliberate expression. It supplies the interstitial spaces that serves as fertile ground for cultural production and the refiguring of nationhood as narrative. To Bhabha, the “study [of] the nation through its narrative address does not merely draw attention to its language and rhetoric; it also attempts to alter the conceptual object itself. If the problematic ‘closure’ of textuality questions the ‘totalization’ of national culture, then its positive value lies in displaying the wide dissemination through which we construct the field of meanings and symbols associated with national life” (Introduction: Narrating the Nation 3). Inaction contributes to this project of deconstructing and reconceiving national life through its existence outside of the discourse of nationalism and its counter-stance to the privileging of action. The healing of the Janus figure resurrects the spaces of pluralities and ambivalence that totalizing discourses have collapsed, and negotiate questions of belonging to craft a nationhood that aims to include.

REFERENCES

- Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Half of a Yellow Sun*. New York: Anchor Books, 2007. Print.
- Bhabha, Homi K. "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation." *The Blackwell Reader in Contemporary Social Theory*. Ed. Anthony Elliot. Oxford: Blackwell, 1999. 211-219. Electronic.
- Bhabha, Homi K. "Introduction: Locations of Culture." Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994. 1-18. Electronic.
- Bhabha, Homi K. "Introduction: Narrating the Nation." *Nation and Narration*. Ed. Homi K. Bhabha. Oxon: Routledge, 1990. 1-7. Electronic.
- Bhabha, Homi K. "Remembering Fanon: Self, Psyche and the Colonial Condition." Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. London: Pluto Press, 1986. vii-xxv. Electronic.
- Broadhead, Will. "Migration and Hegemony: Fixity and Mobility in Second-Century Italy." *People, Land, and Politics: Demographic Developments and the Transformation of Roman Italy 300 BC-AD 14*. Ed. Luuk de Ligt and S. J. Northwood. Leiden: Brill, 2008. 451-470.
- Das, Veena. "Sexual violence, discursive formations, and the state." *Economic and Political Weekly* 31.35/37 (1996): 2411-2423. Electronic.
- Grier, Beverly C. *Invisible Hands: Child Labor and the State in Colonial Zimbabwe*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2006. Electronic.
- Krishna, Sankaran. *Postcolonial Insecurities: India, Sri Lanka, and the Question of Nationhood*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999. Electronic.
- Menon, Ritu and Kamala Bhasin. "'They wanted to die': Women, kinsmen, and partition." *Violence against Women: Victims and Ideologies*. Colombo, Sri Lanka: Sri Lanka Foundation, 1996. Electronic.
- Seshadri, Kalpana Rahita. *HumAnimal: Race, Law, Language*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2012. Print.
- Spivak, Gayatri. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak, Gayatri. *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999. 2197-2208. Electronic.
- Suarez-Orozco, Marcelo. "A grammar of terror: Psychocultural responses to state terrorism in Dirty War and Post-Dirty War Argentina." *The paths to domination, resistance, and terror*. Ed. Carolyn Nordstrom and JoAnn Martin. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992. 219-259. Electronic.
- Wasson, Donald L. *Ancient History Encyclopedia*. 6 February 2015. Electronic. 6 May 2016. <<http://www.ancient.eu/Janus/>>.

FACULTY SPONSOR: Stephen Levin, Ph.D.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Prof. Stephen Levin who cultivated my interest in Postcolonial Theory and Literary Theory, and who inspired this particular line of inquiry. My thanks also go to Prof. Olga Litvak, for her insightful comments and critiques.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY | Themal Ellawala

Themal Ellawala '17 is a Psychology major with an interest in the intersection of Anthropology, critical theory, and social justice. He is particularly attentive to how modernity imposes on racial, sexual, and gendered ontologies, especially in the Global South. His interests coalesce around South Asia and the South Asian Diaspora, and the possibilities that postcolonial studies and queer theory offer to interrogate various gendered and sexualized existences in these geo-cultural spaces. Themal is currently working through an ethnography on genders and sexualities in Sri Lanka that was conducted in 2016 and plans to continue exploring these themes in a doctoral program in Anthropology.