

A PARADISE LOST LONG AGO: A STUDY WITH REFERENCE TO CHINUA ACHEBE'S THERE WAS A COUNTRY: A PERSONAL HISTORY OF BIAFRA

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses Chinua Achebe's attempt to confront the historical and spiritual roots of Africa's crisis. The author, one of Africa's greatest intellectual giants was consistent in courageously criticizing the misrule on the continent for decades, stances which put his life at risk and forced him to flee his native country. His great disappointment manifests itself in his last and latest book "There was a Country-A personal History of Biafra". Achebe mourns Biafra, but his anger is directed at the failures of Nigeria. This book is a fascinating and gripping memoir of Biafra where he relates his experience of the war, both as he lived it and how he came to understand it. The end of Biafra didn't bring an end to the pogroms against the Igbo, nor to Nigeria's problems. He has also offered a solution to resolve these problems, by invoking the Negritude embedded in the *mbari* of his own Igbo culture, which emphasizes mutual respect and coexistence. He declares that the solutions to Africa's problems can be found in Africa—her bosom, her humanity—and that Africans must rebuild their own indigenous institutions.

KEYWORDS: Chronicle, Pre-Independence, Post-Independence, Colonialism, Exploitation, Protest, Resolve, Solution

INTRODUCTION

Albert Chinualumogu Achebe, the internationally celebrated Nigerian author, statesman and dissident who gave birth to modern Africa literature with "Things Fall Apart," lived through tumultuous phases of pre-independence, the early post-independence years, the atavistic violence of the civil war years, the post-civil war reconstruction years of Nigeria, events signposted by the wiles of the departing colonial masters, the unimaginative but corrupt independence leaders, the intervention and failure of revolutionary-inclined military leaders. He matured in the era of hope for freedom, for liberation, for independence from the stifling colonial rule. As a theoretician of development and change, Achebe fervently believed in the power of literature and the creative arts to heal and regenerate people and society. He viewed the tradition of written African literature as constituting landmark progress for African civilization and repossession of the patrimony looted and appropriated by European imperialist interests Achebe regarded the corpus of African literature as aesthetic and moral glue that bonded African people on the continent and the African Diaspora. "The new literature in Africa", says he, "like the old, is aware of the possibilities available to it for celebrating humanity in our continent... Whether the rendezvous of separate histories will take place in a grand, harmonious concourse or be fought with bitterness and acrimony will all depend on whether we have learned to recognize one another's presence and are ready to accord human respect to everybody".

Chinua Achebe was born in Eastern Nigeria in the era of protest against colonialism, the era of Adolf Hitler-led Nazism. He grew up in the era of the victory of the Allied Forces in the Second World War even though he did not fight in it as many blacks from Africa did. He was lucky not to have been drafted into the war ostensibly he was either too young or the colonial masters did not spot him for draft into the army. He matured in the era of hope for freedom, for liberation, for independence from the stifling colonial rule. He gave his people enormous hope in novels, short stories and articles

against the evil of colonialism and internal despotism of military rule. But that fire of hope in undying humanity also flickered during the tragic civil war.

In his mid-20's, Chinua Achebe completed the handwritten manuscript for "Things Fall Apart," a novel about a Nigerian tribesman called "Okonkwo" in Eastern Nigeria and his downfall at the hands of British imperialist conquistadores. It was not only a product of an "infant prodigy" or a product of genius; it was a fulfillment of a mission set by the author for himself of which reasons must be sought in the book itself: reasons which define the character and attitude; and pattern of other works of the author himself for the rest of his life on earth. Achebe burst into literary fame with the publication of his first novel, 'Things Fall Apart', in 1958. The title became an undying image and symbol of confrontation with and resistance against European nations that invaded the African continent to colonise and exploit. This was the book that catapulted him into cosmic literary space and time through which he entered the celestial Hall of Fame of world literary giants. From then on he became restless in spirit and penned novels, stories and essays to rewrite and reclaim the history and the lost glory of his race, country and people. He was a moral and literary model that provided moral compass for countless Africans marooned in island of self-inflicted ignorance and superstitions that would have otherwise been completely lost as a waste product of Nature.

Achebe, like Soyinka, was worried and preoccupied with the problems of Nigeria. He was concerned with the structural contradictions and crisis of identity of Nigeria that prevented the country from realizing its manifest destiny even after more than fifty years of independence, a country without focus or direction, without a strategic statecraft, a country governed according to daily routine. He wanted to pull these problems apart, to dissect and diagnose them, understand the anatomical ailments and provide medication for them. He has reflected, again and again, on the debacle of Nigeria's inability to achieve socio-economic and technological transformation post independence. He traced the disease to the mental handicap of the elite to connect the technical graph of development to the science of inventive and creative thinking. He cites the example of Modern Japan, after the Meiji revolution in the 19th century, which collected, transcribed, converted and reformulated the country's oral heritage of stories, myths, legends, religious beliefs, superstitions, proverbs, and other sites of its antiquity to create the basis of the sciences and technologies that have defined Japanese prosperity for over a century.

He was a quintessential humanist, radical reformer, indomitable defender of freedom and democracy and a nationalist who employed the felicitous weapons of literature to radicalise consciousness. Among his African peers, he shares the platform of honour with Wole Soyinka and J.P. Clark of Nigeria, Sembene Ousmane and Mariama Ba of Senegal, Ama Ata Aidoo and Ayi Kwei Armah of Ghana, Naguib Mahfouz and Nawal El Shadawi of Egypt, Ngugi wa Thiong'o of Kenya, Okot p'Bitek of Uganda, Nurideen Farah of Somalia, and Alex La Guma and Nadine Gordimer of South Africa.

The literary stalwart and great nationalist and statesman was offered national honours twice but he rejected them as he wanted to show his resistance to the way Nigeria was being governed. He declared that the greatest honour that any government could confer on him was the governance which could lighten the burden of the yoke of the masses and relieve their poverty., a land freed of violence and hatred. He desired for such a government that was committed to welfare, a people-centred or friendly government and not a government that was neck deep in corruption.

In 2004, he did not accept it from then-president Olusegun Obasanjo, essentially in protest over Nigeria's governance with special reference to his home state of Anambra. At the time, he wrote, "Nigeria's condition today under your watch is too dangerous for silence. I must register my disappointment and protest by declining to accept the high

honor awarded me in the 2004 honors list." The second time in 2011, he wrote, "The reasons for rejecting the offer when it was first made have not been addressed let alone solved. It is inappropriate to offer it again to me. I must therefore regretfully decline the offer again." He was criticized, abused and labeled arrogant for having rejected the honours. The Jonathan administration's response was that Achebe was out of touch with Nigerian realities, and Reuben Abati, the presidential press spokesman, made specific reference to "widely acclaimed electoral reforms" to refute Achebe.

Chinua Achebe was the intellectual grandmaster of his country. Nobody has been able to surpass his intellectual prowess, or intrepid spirit. He was able to weave all socio-cultural and political strands of the past, the present and the future together in masterpieces such as *Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God*, *Man of the People*, to mention a few of his major works but not to mention his collection of poems through which he weaved together a tapestry of life in various forms and genres. He was also able to bridge the generational gaps: he wrote copiously for the audience of matured adults, youths and children in a panoramic display of prodigious intellect, in a mosaic manner that is prosaic in nature.

Achebe's *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra* (2012) depicts his outrage against the failed Nigerian nation-state. The title is loaded with grief because it shows a country which does not exist now, a country with no potential future. The country in question is Biafra, the losing side in the Nigerian civil war of 1967–1970. Achebe was a roving ambassador of Biafra and he was committed unconditionally to its defence. The defeat of Biafra within three years and the horror and the number of the dead, especially innocent children, constituted another chapter of "things fall apart" for him. The book is not a hagiography of the war; He is harsh in his assessment, not only of the Nigerian experiment, but on the Biafra leadership. In the book he writes, "Writing has always been a serious business for me. I felt it was a moral obligation. A major concern of the time was the absence of the African voice. Being part of that dialogue meant not only sitting at the table but effectively telling the African story from an African perspective - in full earshot of the world."

The failure of post-war leadership, the ogre of blood-thirsty military dictators, and the oil-nourished corruption of the bourgeoisie crippled Nigeria's capacity to convert the challenge of the war to opportunity for industrial take-off and improved living conditions. He regrets the loss of the utopian country called Nigeria: "Most members of my generation, who were born before Nigeria's independence, remember a time when things were very different. Nigeria was once a land of great promise and progress, a nation with immense resources at its disposal – natural resources, yes, but even more so, human resources. But the Biafran war changed the course of Nigeria. It was a cataclysmic experience that changed the history of Africa". The country became plagued with "a home-grown enemy: the political ineptitude, mediocrity, indiscipline, ethnic bigotry, and corruption of the ruling class," as Mr. Achebe writes. He was frustrated by the deteriorating educational system, the stifling social environment, soul-destroying abject poverty, suffocating embrace of religious bigotry and visible institutional paralysis leading to untrammelled corruption and malfeasances, all of which were consequences of unmitigated disaster of military rule and incompetent civilians and politicians.

To resolve these problems, Mr. Achebe also invoked the Negritude embedded in the *mbari* of his own Igbo culture, which emphasizes mutual respect and coexistence. "The Igbo believe that art, religion, everything, the whole of life are embodied in the art of the masquerade," He says it is the cosmic masquerade that upholds the "virtues of African tolerance and accommodation."

It is astonishing that Wole Soyinka and Achebe, two authors writing from different perspectives, declare that the solutions to Africa's problems can be found in Africa—her bosom, her humanity—and that Africans must rebuild their own indigenous institutions. The book doesn't begin with war. It begins with his memoir, his family history and the circumstances of his birth, education and career as a writer and intellectual, which are inextricably intertwined with

colonialism, which Achebe describes in a metaphor that extends and specifies the Igbo proverb: “a man who does not know where the rain began to beat him cannot say where he dried his body.”

“The rain that beat Africa” began four to five hundred years ago, from the ‘discovery’ of Africa by Europe, through the transatlantic slave trade, to the Berlin Conference of 1885. That controversial gathering of the world’s leading European powers precipitated what we now call the Scramble for Africa, which created new boundaries that did violence to Africa’s ancient societies and resulted in tension-prone modern states. “It took place without African consultation or representation, to say the least.” The British came to control the region of West Africa, an area populated by over 250 ethnic groups and as many distinct languages. They were handed it, Achebe says, “like a piece of chocolate cake at a birthday party.”

The Federation of Nigeria, as it is known today, was never really one homogeneous country, for it's widely differing peoples and tribes. But, the former colonial master decided to keep the country one in order to effectively control her vital resources for their economic interests. Thus, for administrative convenience the Northern and Southern Nigeria were amalgamated in 1914. Thereafter the only thing this people had in common was the name of their country since each side had different administrative set - up. This alone was an insufficient basis for true unity. Under normal circumstances the amalgamation ought to have brought the various people together and provided a firm basis for the arduous task of establishing closer cultural, social, religious, and linguistic ties vital for true unity among the people. There was division, hatred, unhealthy rivalry, and pronounced disparity in development.

In 1960, Nigeria gained independence from Britain and became a Federation and remained one country. Soon afterwards the battle to consolidate the legacy of political and military dominance of a section of Nigeria over the rest of the Federation began with increased intensity. The growth of nationalism in the society and the subsequent emergence of political parties were based on ethnic/tribal rather than national interests, and therefore had no unifying effect on the people against the colonial master. Rather, it was the people themselves who were the victims of the political struggles which were supposed to be aimed at removing foreign domination.

After six years of independence, the Muslim Hausas in northern Nigeria began massacring the Christian Igbos in the region, prompting tens of thousands of Igbos to flee to the east, where their people were the dominant ethnic group. The Igbos doubted that Nigeria's oppressive military government would allow them to develop, or even survive, so on May 30, 1967, Lieutenant Colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu and other non-Igbo representatives of the area established the Republic of Biafra, comprising several states of Nigeria. It is this struggle that eventually degenerated into coup, counter coup and a bloody civil war. The immediate cause of the civil war itself may be identified as the coup and the counter coup of 1966 which altered the political equation and destroyed the fragile trust existing among the major ethnic groups.

As a means of holding the country together in the last result, the country was divided into twelve states from the original four regions in May 1967. The former Eastern Region under Lt. Col. Ojukwu saw the act of the creation of states by decree "without consultation" as the last straw, and declared the Region an independent state of "Biafra". The Federal Government in Lagos saw this as an act of secession and illegal. Several meetings were held to resolve the issue peacefully without success. To avoid disintegration of the country, the central government was left with only one choice of bringing back the region to the main fold by force. The Federal side expected a quick victory while the Biafrans saw the war as that of survival and were ready to fight to the last man. The Nigerian Civil War broke out on 6 July 1967. The war was the culmination of an uneasy peace and stability that had plagued the Nation from independence in 1960. This situation had its genesis in the geography, history, culture and demography of Nigeria. By August 1967, the war had been extended to the

Mid - Western Region by the Biafrans with the aim to relief pressure on the northern front and to threaten the Federal Capital, Lagos. Both sides employed Political, Diplomatic, Psychological and Military strategies to prosecute the war. By the end of April 1969, after almost two years of bloody and destructive war, the envisioned quick victory had eluded the Federal side, the rebel enclave had been drastically reduced in size but the Biafrans were still holding on. More peace conferences were held but none achieved a cease - fire and an end to the war. The Federals embarked on a strategic envelopment of the remaining Biafran enclave. By the Christmas of 1969, it was obvious that the end of the civil war was near. The self - acclaimed Head of State of Biafra, Lt. Col. Ojukwu, realizing the hopelessness of the situation fled the enclave with his immediate family members on the 10th of January 1970. The Commander of the Biafran Army who took over the administration of the remaining enclave surrendered to the Federal Government on 14th January 1970 bringing an end to the war, secessionist attempt and bloodshed. Several lessons were learnt from the war and these have helped in the unification, political, military and economical progress of the country.

The Nigerian Civil War was fought to reintegrate and reunify the country. During this civil war, an estimated 3,000 to 5,000 people died daily in Biafra from starvation as a result of the naval blockade. In his book, Achebe describes a wartime spirit that inspired Biafran engineers to build army tanks out of reinforced Range Rovers and to invent the infamous 'ogbunigwe' (bucket bomb) with devastating effect. Achebe cites these as evidence of the quality of the Nigerian people, and he laments the corruption that strangled such ingenuity. Igbos were reintegrated into Nigerian society, but still faced economic discrimination. Achebe believed that Igbo people are the engine of Nigeria's advancement, stifled by a corrupt elite that prefers power and mediocrity to meritocracy. "Igbo ostracisation", he says, is "one of the main reasons for the country's continued backwardness." Corruption has eroded the people's sense of self and the struggle continues. There is not a single museum dedicated to the war effort anywhere in Nigeria. There are pretend-museums, but nothing in honor of millions dead.

In one of his essays "The Trouble with Nigeria," he said "The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership." There was, he said, nothing wrong with the Nigerian character, its land or climate or water or air or anything else. What was wrong, he said, was "the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which are the hallmarks of true leadership."

Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe and J.P. Clark, the three Nigerian literary icons were so frustrated with the misgovernance that the trio jointly signed a statement entitled "LET NOT THIS FIRE SPREAD!!! An Appeal to the Nigerian Nation Community". In the statement they said " We urge a proactive resolve in all such claimants to leadership. It is not sufficient to make pious pronouncements. All who possess any iota of influence or authority, who aspire to moral leadership must act now to douse the first flickers of 'responses in kind' even before they are manifested, and become contagious. We urge that, beginning from now, leaders become true leaders in all communities, utilise the platforms of their associations, professions, clubs, places of instruction and places of worship, NGOs and other civic organisations, that they relentlessly spread the manifesto of Community – capital letters! – as an all-embracing human bond, and refuse to be sucked into the cauldron of mutual attrition that is the purpose of the religious warmongers among us... All who claim to be leaders must lead – but in the right direction!.. This appeal comes from Three survivors of the pioneering Writer/Teacher Generation of a half century, post independence Nigeria, in her continuous struggle for a viable Nation-being."

The last chapter in the book is an exhortation to better governance, in which he examines corruption, ethnic bigotry, state failure and the steps Nigeria must take to rehabilitate itself. Decades of decadent irresponsible governance have robbed millions of Nigerian youths of their birthright – a good education, safety and security. Add to that a future that

is certain only in the sense that there is probably none. 'There Was A Country' is an elegy from a master storyteller who has witnessed the undulating fortunes of a nation, which has yet to fulfil its potential. The book is not all about Biafra. There are powerful passages there for instance about the burden of the writer of African extraction, profoundly moving are his thoughts on what we should be preoccupied with as writers and thinkers. Achebe is a meticulous writer, providing sources everywhere appropriate. He turns the examination inward, asking hard questions of himself and those most like him. "What", he asks, "is the role of the writer in Africa? What is an African novel, and what is its cultural function, at home and in the broader world? What political obligations attend to the writer? Does the writer have any obligation to the preservation of culture? How much of the act of writing is a personal act, and how much of it is public? What does it mean for the written word to triumph?"

Despite the war, he lived a remarkably productive life. Driven by his belief in the political obligations of the writer, he became Biafra's international envoy, promoting the cause in Canada, Europe and Senegal. He set up a publishing company with his close friend Chris Okigbo, and became Biafra's communications minister, writing a manifesto for the republic. He describes being part of an intellectual elite that came together to recreate a Biafran microcosm of Nigeria's early spirit, their ideals drawn from a mix of traditional Igbo philosophy, US-style liberalism and socialism. The fact that he lived for many years and finally died in the United States tells us something about the comparative differences between Nigeria and the United States. It was not accidental that Chinua Achebe committed his soul to the advocacy for genuine democracy in Nigeria because he was not only influenced by the democratic system in America but actually experienced it in its workings for many years of his adult life.

Achebe received numerous awards and more than 30 honorary doctorates, but among the tributes he may have valued most was Nelson Mandela's. "There was a writer named Chinua Achebe," Mandela wrote, "in whose company the prison walls fell down."

Chinua Achebe, founding father of African fiction whose writings chronicled Nigeria's troubled history died on 21st March 2013. He should be given credit for shedding light and exposing historical gaps and political blunders. He left behind a country that is still struggling with self-identity, with nation-hood, its disparate cultural milieu and fragile state structures. He left the tribe of literati that see him as a father figure. He was perhaps of the view that things may have fallen apart unknown to many, which was why he titled his last controversial work: *There was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra*.

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