



## CHINUA ACHEBE AND THE NIGERIAN PREDICAMENT: A TRIBUTE TO A PATRIOT

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### ABSTRACT

It can be said – without any fear of contradiction-that as a country, Nigeria has been thoroughly misruled by members of the political class. In this regard, all the regimes that the country has had since the departure of the colonialists in 1960 are culpable. In spite of this, the country has produced a number of great and eminent people in all fields of human endeavour, and one of these is Chinua Achebe. This essay is aimed at celebrating the life of Achebe who is widely acclaimed as a literary giant. While acknowledging the fact that like all human beings, Achebe was not perfect, it is contended that he was a great patriot, a globally venerated writer, and an indefatigable critic of bad governance and the domination of man by man.

**Key words:** Patriotism, Predicament, and Patriot.

### (1) Introduction

*The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. There is nothing basically wrong with the Nigerian character. There is nothing wrong with the Nigerian land or climate or water or air or anything else. The Nigerian problem is 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...*

- Chinua Achebe (1983:1).

The above assertion is a penetrating depiction of Nigeria's current existential realities; it is as incontrovertible today as it was three decades ago. In fact, the overall situation in contemporary Nigeria is far worse and more deplorable than what ignited the patriotic outbursts of Professor Achebe in 1983. For more than five decades of self-rule, Nigeria has been mismanaged by incredibly inept and embarrassingly incompetent, clueless, and egregiously kleptocratic regimes. This explains the present "ubiquity of poverty and misery in the country" (Obo and Adie, 2013). Indeed, to borrow Timamy's description of Africa (which also eloquently x-rays the Nigerian predicament), one of Nigeria's "most disconcerting paradoxes is that, despite being a treasure trove of abundant economic and mineral resources (many of which are strategic)," the country

*continues to wallow in paralyzing poverty among other immiserizing conditions: crushing debt and growing indebtedness, civil strife and violent conflicts, vampiristic leaderships and impoverishing misgovernance, predatory corruption and deepening economic malaise, intensifying environmental degradation and acute health emergencies, to name but a few...(Timamy, 2007:648).*

Albeit a thoroughly misgoverned country, Nigeria has given the world many inestimably valuable gifts; one of these is Chinua Achebe. This essay is written in honour of this illustrious and venerable Nigerian, who clearly demonstrated his love for his fatherland. Achebe believed that in view of the almost inexhaustible pool of human and material resources with which Nature has graciously blessed Nigeria, all that is needed to engender an all-round societal transformation is good leadership. In his words,

*the elite factor is an indispensable element of leadership. And leadership itself is indispensable to any association of human beings desirous of achieving whatever goals it set for itself. When such an association is engaged in a difficult undertaking or is in pursuit of a risky objective such as nation-building, the need for competent leadership becomes particularly urgent... (Achebe, 2010:49)*

Achebe also acknowledged the complimentary and vital role which an alert followership can play in the development of the country. He posited that

*we need not spend too long on the argument for pre-eminence of followers. It is enough to say that no known human enterprise has flourished on the basis of the following leading the leaders. The cliché that people get the leader they deserve is a useful exaggeration-useful, because it reminds the general populace of the need for vigilance in selecting their leaders (where they have a chance to do so), and for keeping them under constant surveillance...* (Achebe, 2010: 56 and 49).

Unfortunately, the operators of the Nigerian state have deliberately, systematically, and methodically destroyed all the fabrics of the Nigerian socio-formation to the extent that an immensely gullible and psychologically brutalized followership has been created. In one of his interesting essays, Adesanmi (2012) acknowledges the importance of a conscientized followership and criticizes the current followership in Nigeria for not challenging "the buccaneers currently running and ruining our lives". He points out that a "sedated followership" has emerged from "a cowed and disempowered citizenry" as a result of the "purposed, transitive assault on education" by "Nigeria's depraved rulers". Adesanmi also contends that the educational institutions per se are not the target, as "the direct target is civics, that

dangerous area of education and the humanities which produces sentient citizens capable of asking critical questions and acting". As he puts it,

*when you plan to turn the largest political union of black people on the face of the earth into the most embarrassing open sore of the black race; when you plan to turn Africa's most populous country into a continental example of how not to run a country; when you plan to loot on such a scale as to make... your own appointed anti-corruption czar declare in exasperation that the scale of looting by Nigeria's political leaders is a 'symptom of mental illness'; when you are planning to loot on that uninterrupted scale... since the 1980s, the first thing you need to do is manufacture a followership incapable of critically challenging you or one that would applaud and hail your actions, especially if there is the occasional trickle down from the table of the bacchanals you organize at their expense (Adesanmi, 2012).*

In this paper, we shall attempt to reinforce the view that Achebe was a patriot who used his talents and knowledge to promote the cause of his country and race; but this is not a review of his staggering literary accomplishments. We shall leave that to competent authorities in the world of literature. Our desire here is to join others in exalting this eminently worthy and deserving Nigerian. This essay has five sections; the introduction forms section one. In section two, the concept "patriotism" is briefly clarified. In section three, a brief biography of Achebe is presented; section four contains an analysis of Achebe as an unflinching lover of his country, a writer, and a critic of poor governance. The conclusion forms section five.

## (II) A NOTE ON PATRIOTISM

As a concept, patriotism has been thoroughly misused, abused, and misrepresented by the members of the ruling class in Nigeria. To them, patriots are those who have directly or indirectly participated in misgoverning the country, and those who have supported them. This explains, for instance, why Nigeria's National Honours and Awards- which are meant for persons with sterling and unimpeachable credentials- are always doled out to persons most of who ought to be in jail for their many crimes against the country and its people. As Achebe (cited in Adesanmi, 2012) once put it,

*there will always be some people whose personal, selfish interests are, in the short term at least, well served by the mismanagement and social iniquities. Naturally they will be extremely loud in their adulation of the country and its system and will be anxious to pass themselves off as patriots and to vilify those who disagree with them as trouble-makers or even traitors. But doomed is the nation which permits such people to define patriotism for it...*

For our purpose, it is important to emphasize that patriotism is not what Nigeria's current or former rulers and their supporters say it is. Patriotism, from the Latin patria, which means fatherland, is a sentiment, a psychological attachment to one's nation, a love of one's country (Heywood, 2007: 119). According to the Academic's Dictionary of Political Science, in the literal sense, the term patriotism means "love of one's country", and a patriot "loves everything of his country-its people, its culture, its land, its language, its history, its territories" (Chanturvedi, 2006: 227 and 228). On its part, the Oxford Concise Dictionary of Politics states that patriotism has always been defined as love of one's country, and patriotism as such does not necessitate a programme of action; it stimulates and informs nationalism, but is not always nationalistic (McClean and McMillan, 2003:400).

In one of his essays, Adebani (2007:65) cites George Kateb as arguing that patriotism is a mistake and that "it is typically a grave error and its source is typically a state of mental confusion". Kateb is also reported as pointing out that patriotism is most fully exemplified by the readiness to die or kill for one's country, and that the "mistake of patriotism is an inevitable mistake. It cannot be avoided; almost no one can help being a patriot of some kind and to some degree".

In this essay, we agree with Achebe's view on the meanings of patriotism and patriot, and because of its appositeness, we quote at length:

*who is a patriot? He is a person who loves his country. He is not a person who says he loves his country. He is not even a person who shouts or swears or sings his love of his country. He is one who cares deeply about the happiness and well-being of his country and all its people. Patriotism is an emotion of love directed by a critical intelligence. A true patriot will always demand the highest standards of his country and accept nothing but the best for and from people. He will be outspoken in condemnation of their short-comings without giving way to superiority, despair or cynicism. That is my idea of a patriot (Achebe, 1983:15-16).*

## (III) Achebe: A Short Biography

It was on November 16, 1930 in Ogidi Community located in Idemili North Local Government Area of Anambra State, South-East Nigeria that Nature blessed Nigeria with a son who was to become one of the country's most distinguished and universally acclaimed personalities. That was when Professor Chinua Achebe was born. Named Albert Chinualumogu Achebe, the young Achebe, after his primary education, gained admission into Government College, Umuahia in January 1944.

In the middle of 1944, his first year in high school, Achebe was promoted, with five others, to class two. From then till his high school graduation in 1948, he was the best student in his class. That same year, he won a merit scholarship (one of very few awarded that year) to the University College, Ibadan to study Medicine. University College, Ibadan was the only institution for university education in the country. In 1949, at the end of his freshman year, Achebe changed his course and graduated, Bachelor of Arts, in 1953. Throughout those four years, his teachers observed repeatedly that Achebe was not only the best student in the class, but also the best writer of English. He also achieved the best result in his degree examination (Momah, 2013).

After his graduation, Achebe's meteoric rise to stardom became irrepressible. By dint of hard work, he rose to occupy a number of professorial chairs in various Nigerian and foreign universities. In 1990, after attending series of

events organized to celebrate his sixtieth birthday anniversary in Nigeria, Achebe was involved in a ghastly auto-crash that nearly cost him his life. Achebe thus joined the huge league of Nigerians who had personally felt-and are still feeling-the debilitating consequences of the criminal negligence of Nigeria's social infrastructure by the extremely irresponsible managers of the Nigeria state. That accident made Professor Achebe to spend his last twenty-three years on earth in a wheel chair; but from that wheelchair, in the words of Olumhense (2013), he cast his considerable wisdom far and wide, and at the foot of that chair, a worldwide horde of admirers came to hear him say whatever he wished.

In spite of the physical set back, Achebe continued to make his prodigious mental and intellectual resources available to different universities across the world. In 2009, for example, Achebe left Bard College for Brown University (both in the United States), and at the Ivy League Brown, he assumed the chair of the David and Marianna Fisher University Professor of Africana Studies and Literary Arts (Ndibe, 2013). Achebe passed away on March 22, 2013 few months to his 83<sup>rd</sup> birthday, and was buried on May 23, 2013.

The point has been brilliantly made that life, like an Africa masquerade, does not always end in the margin of expectations of mortal men. The mystery of life is a consummation of the immortality of the human soul in the sense that life and death are two sides of the same coin. For a seed to bring forth new ones, that seed must die and decay. It is only in death that there can be life. In life we experience death and in death we reap life in abundance. Such is the paradox of our existence and the mystery of life and death (Nwankwo, 2007:53). We agree with the observation that Achebe is one of those epically unique individuals whose lives have been so full, so purposive and so impactful that we begin to pray that they will never die. But who doesn't know that that is mere wishful thinking? To be sure, the Eagle on Iroko didn't die young, but he left when we still need him urgently and acutely. He has gone, but he left so much of, by, himself behind (Osundare, 2013).

There is no doubt that Achebe's "surpassing gift as a writer as well as his admirable personal attributes will combine to make him-one can confidently predict- an imperishable presence in global letters and life (Ndibe, 2013). Indeed, in the words of Michael Thelwell, the universality of Achebe's oeuvre rested on the integrity and particularity of his sense of community, of his roots, his origins, his identity and his culture (Adinuba, 2013). All through his life, Achebe remained to the very end, a man of unbelievable and angelic integrity, who lived through Nigeria's consuming jungle of corruption without compromising his integrity. He was a man wedded to the greater calling of selfless service to humanity (Nwobu, 2013). And so, in the words of Osundare (2013), "the world celebrates the LIFE of this distinguished story-teller and thinker. (yes, celebrate, for to mourn is to concede supremacy to Death- and Oblivion, its Mephistophelean factotum)."

#### **(IV)Achebe: Patriot, Writer, Critic**

Achebe's patriotic zeal inflamed his desire for the betterment of his country. He selflessly deployed his overwhelming talents and skills as a writer in furtherance of the interests of Nigeria and Africa. Indeed, Achebe was obviously aware that

*in a very definite sense, writing is more of a mission than a profession. This is so because the writer is first and foremost an individual, a concrete human being who has a vision, and who intends to reconstruct society, both literally and figuratively, along an envisioned line of action. Thus, a writer's first and primary task is to procreate humanity, using the published material as a tool. This task centres around the writer's immediate geo-physical and social surroundings as well as the history or evolution of those surroundings (Nwankwo, 1989:177).*

And according to Sartre (cited in Jinadu, 1980:136),

*whether he is an essayist, a pamphleteer, a satirist, or a novelist, whether he speaks only of individual passions or whether he attacks the social order, the writer, a free man addressing free men, has a single subject-freedom.*

Achebe had several important literary works to his credit. Apart from the legendary *Things Fall Apart*, the globally acknowledged classic which he wrote in 1958, barely five years after his graduation from the university, he also authored *No Longer At Ease*, *Arrow Of God*, *A Man Of The People*, *Anthills Of The Savannah*, *How The Leopard Got His Claws*, *Morning Yet On Creation Day*, *Beware Soul Brother*, *Hopes And Impediments*, *Chike And The River*, *Girls At War*, *The Drum*, *Home And Exile*, *There Was A Country*, and many others. A remarkable element of Achebe's literary attainments is that his works were "written with his inimitable readability, simplicity, eloquence, coherence, rigour and insightfulness" (Haruna, 2013).

In the internationally renowned *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe's first and most popular novel, the mode of social organization of a typical pre-colonial Nigerian society is presented, and it shows that the impact of colonialism on Nigerian and African societies was largely disruptive and destructive. That piece of creative ingenuity represents one of Achebe's greatest contributions to humanity in general and the literary fraternity in particular. It symbolizes his support of the view that "the imperialism of the dominant paradigms" concerning Africa's pre-colonial past must be challenged, and their distortions, misrepresentations, and stereotypes corrected. He knew that the Nigerian- and the African-was/is a victim of domination, and "the dominated person is the one [against] whom and at the expense of whom dominant paradigms exercise effect, blocking his/her right of creativity and innovation" (Wamba-Dia-Wamba,1996:14). Indeed, he believed, as does Toyo (2004:1), that "a person or nation that is not master of his or its destiny has only a compromised humanity" and "the necessity for all men to struggle for liberty is at once obvious."

In writing that great novel, Achebe's message was clear: the pre-colonial African society "with all its imperfections was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them" (Onwuamaeze, 2013:93). So far, *Things Fall Apart* has been translated into dozens of languages worldwide and millions of copies of it have been sold. While describing his first encounter with the novel, Osundare (2009:45), in an exciting and eloquent commentary points out that it "connected so magically, so instantly, with us that we began to wonder why it had taken so long for the book to reach our hands. A novel so fresh and so familiar, so young and yet so sagacious, it hit our

barn like a bouncing new yam that shoved aside the old, fibrous remnants of yester-harvests. ” And in expressing his admiration, Professor Osundare (2009:47) declares:

*I have never stopped wondering how a 26-year-old Chinua came about the stupendous originality that produced a novel of this world-historic significance. What divine afflatus stoked the fire of his genius? Could Things Fall Apart have been the product of a combination of Achebe's own ingenuity and the ineluctable pull of what he once called 'the Powers of Event'?... For, in many ways, Things Fall Apart possesses the monumental inevitability and the trial-blazing, epoch-making characteristics of Richard Wright's Native Son, Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man, and Gabriel Garcia Marquez's One Hundred Years Of Solitude. In its timing, in the sheer gravitas of its content and elegance of its style, in its complex simplicity and endlessly ironic figurations, Things Fall Apart possesses all the traits of an unrepeatable classic...*

Achebe was never silent or neutral about the growing levels of poverty and underdevelopment in Nigeria. He spoke and wrote against poor governance, corruption, inequality, injustice, and religious bigotry in Nigeria. He was always aware that, as Fanon (cited in Hansen, 1977:21) put it, “there comes a time when silence becomes dishonesty”, and he also undoubtedly agreed with the view that “we must always take sides; neutrality helps the oppressor never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented” (Elie Wiesel, cited in Obo and Obo, 2013:244). Achebe was clearly offended by the deplorable state of the Nigerian society to which he relentlessly drew attention. Adesanmi captured Professor Achebe's frustration and angst when he (the former) angrily stated that

*... Nigeria offends me profoundly and fundamentally in terms of our sorry post colonial history and trajectory. Nigeria offends me because she is unfair and unjust. Nigeria offends me because she offers the bizarre situation in which less than 200,000 buffoons in the political elite have ensured that about 160 million people may never arrive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in my life time (cited in Oyewale, 2013).*

There are many people alive today, sleeping and waking up and performing all the rituals of living, but whose total existence amounts to nothing. They are no better than mere footnotes to the grand events of existence., they are an embarrassment even unto themselves., were they to die, no one will take note of their passing. Their graves will carry no flowers, no significance, no piece of useful history. And yet there are some people who though dead refuse to die. They continue to live on in the people's minds and live with such force that seems physical and real, and always their significance is continually remarked upon., they rule as it were from the grave, as the people for whom they become heroes, icons and legends refuse to allow them to die (Abati, 2005:53). That Chinua Achebe belonged to the latter group is indisputable.

Achebe was well aware that managing the affairs of a human society and overseeing the process of development of a huge and heterogeneous entity like Nigeria could be an uphill task. That's why he emphasized the need for a purposeful, visionary, and selfless leadership in the country. Maier (2000:xxiv) vividly captured Achebe's convictions when he stated that Nigeria's

*... potential is huge. Its tremendous wealth, if properly channeled, holds out the hope that a stable government could unleash the unquestioned energy and talent that pulsates through the rich ethnic mosaic. The human capital is there. Thousands of Nigerian professionals are well educated and skilled enough to drive the country forward. Anyone who witnessed its people endure the constraints of bad government and the sinking economy can testify to the country's resilience.*

Achebe wished that Nigeria would be an industrialized and a developed country, where there is good governance, where societal institutions and structures function efficiently, and where the national wealth is managed in a manner that promotes the welfare of the majority of the people. Indeed, he was not oblivious of the fact that “wealth must be created but it must not be wealth for a few”, and “enough of the population must have a feeling that it is part of the prosperity or that it has even chances of being part of the prosperity, and this could only be guaranteed through policies of government” (Akinyemi, 2004:22). From all indications, it is clear that an issue which immensely perturbed Achebe was

*... what to do with the political psychotics eternally thrown up by Nigeria's dysfunctional political landscape and the colourful masks they often wear to disguise their mental illness. Why do many depraved people who are obviously in need of psychiatric attention tend to prevail in Nigeria's power sweepstakes? (Williams, 2004:39).*

Achebe's awe-inspiring records in his chosen career were globally acknowledged as awards and honours were showered on him across the world. He was given the first Nigerian National Trophy for Literature in 1961., in 1979, the Nigerian National Order of Merit and the Order of the Federal Republic (OFR) were conferred on him., in 1999, he received the first Nigerian National Creativity Award., in 2002, he was the recipient of Germany's Publishers Peace Prize., in 2007, he received the ManBooker International Prize; he also won the 2010 Dorathy and Lillian Gish Prize., etc. In 2004 and 2011, Achebe rejected the award of the Commander of the Federal Republic (CFR) by the Nigerian government because of his dissatisfaction with the deteriorating situation in the country occasioned largely by poor governance and the monumental corruption of public officials.

The fact that Achebe was not awarded the Noble Prize for Literature-eventhough, in our opinion, Things Fall Apart should have won it decades ago-does not devalue his phenomenal literary accomplishments. Professor Achebe must not be assessed through the prisms of the Nobel Prize Committee members, for to do so would amount to accepting the wishes of advocates of man's domination of man. By writing the true story of Africa and forcefully refuting the racist falsehoods written about Africa by Westerners, Achebe provoked the ire of global imperialism. Denying him the Nobel Prize was Imperialism's way of expressing its consternation.

## (V) Conclusion

Through his writings, Chinua Achebe championed the cause of his country and continent. As Olumhense (2013) rightly observed, “the same heart that was beating in the heart of Achebe, the Nigerian, beat in him until the end. He advocated a country of excellence, one in which leaders led the people with patriotism, honesty and determination, not with self-interest and greed and corruption”. As a writer, Achebe was a colossus; as a patriot, he was flawlessly selfless, and as a critic of poor governance and all forms of man’s inhumanity to man, he was consistently intrepid. This is what this essay has attempted to demonstrate.

Achebe’s huge patriotism manifested in his immeasurable love for, and loyalty to, his country since “who saves his country, saves himself, saves all things and all things saved do bless him! Who lets his country die, lets all things die, dies himself ignobly, and all things dying curse him!!” (Benjamin Hill, Jr. cited in Ayoade, 1998:28). There is no doubt that with the passing of Achebe, the Nigerian “human landscape”, to use Soyinka’s phrase (2005:9) has “become irremediably desecrated”.

However, like every human being, Achebe had his shortcomings. For example, in a critique of Achebe’s last book, *There Was A Country: A Personal History Of Biafra, Ibelema* (2012:14) alleges that “...Achebe’s Igbo-centric rhetoric is undermining Nigeria...”, and according to Haruna (2013), Achebe “...seemed to share a by and large self-inflicted persecution complex of his Igbo kith and kin”. But as stated ab initio, the essence of this essay is to add a voice in saluting and celebrating Professor Chinua Achebe, his imperfections notwithstanding. And to him, we say adieu!

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