THE WRITER AND THE BURDEN OF MEMORY: CHINUA ACHEBE’S THERE WAS A COUNTRY: A PERSONAL HISTORY OF BIAFRA

Abstract

Chinua Achebe’s latest book, *There was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra* (2012) adds a fresh perspective to the discordant symphony of autobiographical voices that have greeted the politically turbulent post-independent Nigeria, which reached its crescendo of hysteria in the Nigeria-Biafra war (1967 – 1970). Achebe uses his life-history to re-enact the experience of the civil war, obviously to portray the magnitude of agony suffered by the Igbo ethnic nationality within and outside Biafra. The author delineates the landmarks of what he perceives as the historical injustices and the glaring anomalies of the war, and depicts the people of Eastern Nigeria as primary victims and targets of the atrocities unleashed during and even after the war. As a master storyteller, Achebe crafts a poetically captivating ‘eye-witness’ account of his experience during the pogrom and in the process diagnoses Nigeria’s continued rancorous politics of fragmentation, instability and socio-economic backwardness to colonial legacy, recurrent circle of post-independent leadership failures, endemic corruption, and aggravated insensitivity of the political elite to the gravity of the gradual descent of the nation. Also, Achebe’s narrated involvement in the Biafran cause throws up further debates on the role of the African writer in the shaping of society. It also underscores the usefulness of the autobiographical mode as a tool for historical re-entry into the past and as a voice for engendering a reconciliatory spirit, and for the articulation of national regeneration. This paper critically explores Achebe’s stream of thought in his quest for therapeutic self-repair, and underscores how the writer appropriates historical memory as powerful tool for national re-construction, while disrupting the apparent state of amnesia in Nigerian political leadership.

Introduction

The autobiographical context of Chinua Achebe’s *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra* (hereafter referred to as *There Was a Country*), centres on the evolving memorable events in the life of the author-narrator-protagonist, from family upbringing and education through his public life involvements. This circle of life is in a way juxtaposed with Nigeria’s turbulent evolution from post-independent political momentum with its repercussions on the politics of Nigerian nationhood to the present. But more significantly, the author reflects on the socio-political antecedence that led to the outbreak of the civil war and the emergence of the short-lived Biafran state. By the utility of the autobiographical voice, the author underscores the reasons for and level of his participation in the conflict, and in the
process paints a picture of the devastation and the traumatising experience of the civil war that left an un-healing memory of which the survivors - direct and extended - still have to grapple with long after. Essentially, the story encapsulates the evolving stages of the author’s experience as a Nigerian, a significant Biafran citizen, a writer, a cultural ambassador, a public intellectual, a political activist, and as a mouthpiece of his community. The gloomy scenes of the war theatre, especially in Biafra show the magnitude of human tragedy, the brutality, immorality and devastation of the civil war experience, especially as it affects his Igbo ethnic nationality of Eastern Nigeria, and in the process, indicts successive Nigerian leadership for failure to learn from this experience.

In the first place, because of the position the author takes and the revealing role he plays in the narrative, *There Was a Country* in addition throws up further debates on the African writer and his/her role in society. In Achebe’s story, his firm grasp of the politics of the civil war is deployed to re-create the agonising memory of the brutality and horrors of human misery that characterised the Nigeria/Biafra civil war. He tries to re-define and to put in context Nigeria’s chequered politics of nationhood against the backdrop of the present national reality in which the nation appears to be groping in the dark and seems condemned to repeat this past. Although the author essentially tries to portray the repercussions of the war on his Igbo ethnic stock and to highlight how they were persecuted and undermined in the scheme of things, the story implies that this discriminatory and divisive consciousness has continued to condition Nigeria’s contemporary politics. The post-independent politics of ethnicity which climaxed in the civil war is depicted in Achebe’s memoir as an appalling mistake that should not be wished away, but should be consciously corrected to avoid re-occurrence.

With an autobiographical voice, “the artist and the model coincide, the historian tackles himself as object” (Gorsduf 30), and by this inward act of ‘self-history’, Achebe re-creates the agonising memory and frustrations of continued absence of constructive and intelligible leadership role-models in Nigeria since the lessons of the civil war and several decades after flag independence. With this, the writer probes into the dark recesses of the nation’s body politics and diagnoses the repercussions of the recurrence of the politics of bitterness, ethnicity, nepotism, and the demurrage of corruption and leadership failure that have continued to drag the nation backward in the direction of retrogression and disintegration.

The writer recalls the post-independent antecedence that brought about the inexcusable carnage that engendered and marked the Nigerian-Biafra war, implying that this gloomy past is still lurking in the dark and points out that something
should be done to stem this continued drift. What is implied in the post-mortem that
the story elicits is that the character of Nigerian politics of nationhood has continued
to exhibit behavioural patterns that tend to portray Africans as incapable of handling
their affairs, incapable of creative and intelligent strategies for democratic
governance, economic growth and better welfare for the citizenry. This, to the writer,
is paradoxically a continuation of what amounts to continued “distortions of the
social image of Africa” (Otite 4) as evidenced in the present national status in the
comity of nations. Essentially, the narrator points out that the unhappy legacy of
‘divide and rule’ that attended the colonial era has unfortunately continued to afflict
successive regimes of post-independent Nigeria. With the instrument of flashback,
he re-enters the period preceding flag independence and the civil war that followed
to show that no significant shift has occurred in the equation of governance in
Nigeria’s post-independent experience. He states thus:

Within six years of this tragic colonial manipulation, Nigeria was a
cesspool of corruption and misrule. Public servants helped themselves
freely to the nation’s wealth. Elections were blatantly rigged. The
subsequent national census was outrageously stage-managed; judges
and magistrates were manipulated by politicians in power. The
politicians themselves were pawns of foreign business interests.... The
structure of the country was such that there was an inbuilt power
struggle among the ethnic groups.... (Achebe 51)

This is juxtaposed with the scenarios of misrule that resulted in the atrocities that
characterised post-independent instability with the resultant coups and counter-
coups, stage-managed until the situation degenerated into the horror that was
witnessed in the civil war. He reflects on the initial hilarious response that greeted
the toppling of the inept and corrupt civilian regime that succeeded colonial rule by
the military majors, which in his perception, was soon manipulated to look as an
Igbo coup, which aggravated into the anti-Igbo sentiments in the North and in
Lagos. As he states of the aftermath of this confusion:

The weeks following the coup saw Easterners attacked both randomly
and in an organised fashion. There seemed to be a lust for revenge,
which meant an excuse for Nigerians to take out their resentment on
the Igbos who led the nation in virtually every sector- politics,
education, commerce, and the arts. This group, the Igbo, that gave the
colonising British so many headaches, and then literary drove them out
of Nigeria was now an open target, scapegoats for the failings and
grievances of colonial and post-independence Nigeria. (Achebe, 66-67)
In the thinking of Achebe, Nigerian nationhood after independence is a construction of ethnic affiliation, regional leanings, and a public service consciousness that was tribally arrayed, corrupt and inefficient. The notion of ‘nation’ in his perception has remained more an illusion than reality because the majority ethnic groups are invested with this phobia of rivalry and jealousy in relating to one another while the minority nationalities are still grappling with the imbalances in the national political equation. The tendency to dominate as a colonial legacy has continued to create avoidable tension and desperation for political control at the centre gets fiercer by the day. Going back to the roots of this myriad of troubles, the narrator makes a sweeping glance at the antecedence of Africa’s chequered history with the continued manifestation that propels his thinking in *There Was a Country*:

Africa’s postcolonial disposition is the result of a people who have lost the habit of ruling themselves. We have also had difficulty running the new system foisted on us at the dawn of independence by our “colonial masters”... because the West have had a long but uneven engagement with the continent. 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 hope and progress, a nation with immense resources at its disposal—natural resources... But the Biafran war changed the course of Nigeria. In my view it was a cataclysmic experience that changed the history of Africa. (2)

In an attempt to drive home the complications of Nigeria’s present postcolonial reality, Achebe makes a comparison of his experience as a youth with the fragmentation and difference being witnessed in the present and asserts that he could still recall how his parents “wholeheartedly...embraced strangers from thousands of miles away, with their different customs and beliefs” (Achebe 8), and weighs this against the present reality of inter-ethnic fragmentation. This implies that the new indigenous leadership have for lack of vision given preference for politics of ethnicity and divisiveness bequeathed by the colonisers rather promote values that encourage unity and development. The author points at the urgent need for role-model leadership, the type of fatherly figures symbolised in Nelson Mandela who is acknowledged by the author as a great African, a living legend and an exemplary leader that Africans are in dire need of to emulate, towards galvanising meaningful change and accelerated development. To the narrator, Mandela represents the example of leadership that should be emulated. It is this father-figure that the story of Achebe’s life is dedicated. In this regard Achebe writes thus of Nelson Mandela:
Mandela has delivered magnificently on those dreams. And it is to this great man, lovingly known as Madiba - father of the nation of South Africa, anti-apartheid leader, lawyer, writer, intellectual, humanitarian - that present and future African leaders must all go for sustenance and inspiration. (Achebe 258)

This statement simply implies that lack of visionary leadership has remained the bane of post-independent Africa. The legacies of colonialism seemed to claw like an albatross on the destiny of post-independent African states. Ama Tuma affirms that “colonialism itself laid the mines against successful democritisation” (5) in the sense that the new nations lifted Western paradigm of governance, ‘hook, line and sinker’, which fails to accord or harmonise with African socio-historical and cultural situation. In the narrative, the writer delineates Nigeria’s political landscape as a typical postcolonial condition webbed in the confusion of leadership incapacity and bedevilled by power-hungry, self-serving rulers lacking in strategy for sound economic management and well articulated developmental policy.

The narrator is pained that independence was anticipated as a phase of national reconstruction of which the emergent leaders were expected to commence the corrective regimes of historical repair in all ramifications towards freeing a people long oppressed from the depression of colonial imperialism. But what began to unfold soon after was a cycle of misrule and needless bloodbaths that further prolonged the agonies that characterised colonial domination and the decolonisation process. Politics soon became a game of the survival of the fittest, defined by deep-seated ethnic animosities, with the ‘big three’ powerful ethnic groups locking horns in the hunger for control, spoiled for the lump portion of the ‘national cake’ rather than service to society for the good of all. This tendency is graphically captured in Achebe’s A Man of the People in which the writer depicts the post-independent leadership tussles as a ‘time bomb’ waiting to explode. As envisioned by the writer, this did come to pass in form of political violence, election riggings, social upheavals, palace intrigues, coups and counter-coups with the attendant instability in the polity. The after-effect of this shock is the harsh reality of ethnicity and socio-economic and political imbalance that still remain the bane of Nigerian nationhood several decades after independence.

It is generally acknowledged that before the reluctant retreat of the colonial occupiers from their subjugated territories in Africa, seeds of discord had already been sown and nurtured to full bloom. In effect, colonial stooges and inept indigenous rulers were planted and imposed on the people to further the unfinished imperialist project in the ex-colonies but to the despondence of the masses of these
societies. This is the memory that continues to haunt historically conscious intellectuals like Chinua Achebe in their various writings. Tuma (1) again rightly points out that colonialism did destroy the socio-economic power of the colonised populations, weakened their moral forcefulness and also entrenched despotic tendencies in the leadership who were themselves colonial stooges, having distorted or uprooted such traditional African institutional infrastructures that held the people together. The newly liberated African nations were soon to see each other as political enemies rather than opponents in the pursuit of a common cause of nation building. In envisioning our recent historical reality, Babawale points at the many facets of crisis that had bedevilled postcolonial African societies from the very twilight of independence and states that “Leadership, political violence, corruption, census manipulation, minority disaffection, electoral malpractices, and general insecurity in our country, for instance, were few of the many issues that laid the foundation for the visible sense of hate and indignity that pervades the land”. (10)

The experience of Nigeria’s post-independent politics of nationhood which Chinua Achebe re-captures in his civil war narrative, gives a vivid picture of a fragmented nation webbed in an atmosphere of political rancour and inter-ethnic differences, and locked power tussles. This situation has been steadily aggravated by endemic greed, deep-seated corruption and poor leadership quality. Bayo Ogunade avers that one of the biggest challenges of our history has been that of leadership. In diagnosing this malaise of misrule and greed as the bane of Nigeria’s continued developmental dilemma, Ogunade states thus:

One thing that is evident is the recognition of leadership deficit as an important factor in understanding Nigeria’s predicament. Hitherto, a host of factors, ranging from slavery, colonialism, the existence of the three dominant ethnic groups, inappropriate constitutions, and the nature of Nigeria’s federalism, the military and the absence of democracy, among others, have been used as explanation … It is clear that the problem is that of political and economic mismanagement by the country’s leadership. (2-3)

In There Was a Country, Achebe takes a critical look at the socio-political undercurrent that informed the drift of post-independent Nigerian nation until its descent into its eventual anarchy. On this autobiographical platform, he tries to create moral and political parameters towards a justification of his point of view that the war was a struggle of vendetta and a conspiracy designed by the other big two ethnic groups, advertently or otherwise, to subdue and if possible subjugate his industrious and versatile Igbo race. However, this has been wildly contested. At the other level, he also argues that the Nigeria/Biafra war was aggravated by the
standoff of wit and jealousy, and more or less “a personal war and collision of egos” between Odumegu Ojukwu and Yakubu Gowon with their henchmen and advisers at the top of the commanding heights of the belligerents (Achebe 120). In following the narrator through this historically sensitive and delicate intellectual terrain, one could find the setback to national progress caused by ethnicity, tribalism, politics of bitterness and greed.

To situate the arguments that led to the emergence of the Biafran state, Achebe takes the reader back to the era of ethnic tensions in Nigeria, the politics of cross-fire and the army take-over with its bloody legacies. He also explores the political momentum that triggered the outbreak of the war and the confusion in which the Easterners became tangled in the heartland of the war theatres - hunted down outside the Biafran enclave and bombed or starved to death inside Biafra in the blockades that ensued. By the time the war ended, so much had been lost on both sides but the expectation of the ‘no victor, no vanquished was to Achebe, as it was to the Easterners, a promising sign for true reconciliation, full integration and development. To the narrator, this dream soon turned into a nightmare.

Achebe sees the failure to utilise the opportunity of the surrender of the warring parties as once again a lost opportunity for the reunification of Nigeria and making of a great and powerful nation. His deep sense of disappointment in the post-civil war Nigerian transitional scenario is hinged on the appalling memory of leadership failure that has impacted negatively on the collective welfare of the citizenry and resulted in the stagnation that has prolonged to the present. He puts it in this way:

     The post Nigeria-Biafra civil war era saw a “unified” Nigeria saddled with a greater and more insidious reality. We were plagued by a home-grown enemy: the political ineptitude, mediocrity, indiscipline, ethnic bigotry, and corruption of the ruling class... and to make matters even worse, the country’s young, effable, military head of state, General Yakubu Gowon, ever so cocksure following his victory, proclaimed to the entire Planet that Nigeria had more money than it knew what to do with. A new Era of great decadence and decline was born. It continues to this day. (Achebe 243)

The inglorious era as Achebe asserts, has come to climax in the rise of leadership tyranny and obsession with politics of grab, domination and ethnic fragmentation rather than national integration and development. There Was a Country, no doubt, exudes the consternation of the bewildered nations; it underscores how the vision of a great democracy founded on unity and development has continued to elude Nigeria despite the quantum of human and material resources at the disposal of the
nation. As far as Achebe is concerned, Nigeria represents a lamentable legacy and a wayward sovereignty that has been a source of concern to right-thinking humanity.

From the prism of his autobiographical lens, Nigeria represents a classical case of state failure, prostrate under the siege of post-independent corruption with its opportunistic paralysis. Nigerian nationhood has evolved through multi-faceted violence visited on the citizenry by inept rulers under one disguise or the other. In his essay, ‘Nationalism, the Postcolonial State and Violence’, San-Juan highlights the hangover syndrome of the postcolonial states and indicts the leadership of governmental waywardness, stating that “the nation-state has employed violence to accomplish questionable ends... indicted for committing unprecedented barbarism” (1) against the citizenry that they were supposed to lead, protect and defend.

The narrator does not fail to articulate the relevance of the African writer in the experiences of his society to show that the writer cannot afford to stand aloof and watch his/her society adrift in the direction of the precipice. In *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (1975), Achebe had earlier stated that “an African creative writer who tries to avoid the big social and political issues of contemporary Africa will end up completely irrelevant”. (8) Nigerian writers have brought their talent to bear one way or the other on interpreting the civil war experience as part of the ways of discovering direction to a purposeful future.

The flourishing tradition of civil war narratives in Nigeria has shown that whatever side of the divide each of the authors projects the stories, they all constitute a community of memory, so constituted in the shared past that is rooted on this unhappy history that needs to be repaired. This “shared memory” as Afolayan avers, “rather...provides the background for any meaningful thinking, acting, representing and judging” (15) the situations that truncate Nigeria’s socio-economic advancement.

The people that inhabit the Nigerian nation either consciously or otherwise must bear the burden of this memory one way or the other, although to those that are well-informed, the burden is weightier and much more disturbing when the present reality is placed in the historical context of recent happenings across the country. Many commanders and actors from both sides of the belligerents and civilians, including creative writers, have in different ways and in different genres of writing represented their personal experiences or tried to re-capture the experience that pertains to that agonising phase of Nigeria’s chequered politics of nationhood.
Achebe’s own perspective of the civil war further sheds more light on the ever-contestable issues pertaining to the widely reported atrocities on both sides of the war. They have each tried to re-define their roles in terms of individual or collective, portraying motives, morality and justifications of the roles played by individuals or groups in the course of prosecuting the war. Achebe’s narrative adds new and unique impetus to the arguments about the implications of the writer of engagement doubling as creative writer and sometimes gun-toting political activist. Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, J. P. Clerk-Bekederemo, or such others as Ali Mazrui in his *The Trial of Christopher Okigbo* (1971), and Zulu Sofola in her critical work on the writer and the society have tried to demonstrate the role of the writer in society, and some have even played these other ‘extra-territorial’ roles as combatants in their efforts or zeal to defend the vulnerable of society from the powerful.

The question is repeatedly being asked as to whether the writer should stick to his pen or could swap the pen for a gun to create desirable change in the society. The African writer lives in a cultural, geo-political and historical ferment that is violent where totalitarian and absolute rulers have not been hard to find, making physical confrontation sometimes irresistible. The autobiographer in the present context, like other mortals, feels the pains and anguish engendered in the excruciating political events of his society that other mortals in societies feel, and so tries to justify his role-play in shaping society beyond the power of the pen.

In the autobiographical self-imaging pact, there is an abiding sense of self-identity which encapsulates the author, narrator, protagonist, and carries the collective image with him/her (Lejeune 193). Achebe specifically justifies his Biafra involvement as driven by the zeal political and social justice in favour of his Igbo nationalities against which he witnessed the atrocities that threatened their survival during the civil war. In no other form of narrative is a writer’s activism made more concrete than in the narrative scenario of autobiographical practices where the narrator or actor comes out to announce his identity to the audience and makes his/her story come to real light in relation to the community he represents.

Achebe’s role in the war as contained in his memoir is an eloquent testimony of the dual existence in which a writer could traverse the world of imagination and the solid realm of political participation in the face of threatening realities. But this notion is inconsistent with the argument of Asein that “literature stands in a position to predict, warn and proffer solutions for reordering the state”. (10) He goes further to state that:

There are ... others who have argued that the writer who abandons his primary responsibility to his art and opts to wield guns and hold
up radio stations, does so, not as a writer *sui-generis*, but as an urban guerrilla who does not need the protective garb of being a writer to perform in that public role. (Asein 10)

The possible argument in effect could be understood from the context of the survivalist instinct that is inherent in all mortals. A writer that finds his/her world in a state of siege might be tempted or compelled to react by either carrying placards, leading protest marches to confront the agents of state or whoever the oppressor may be, or carrying guns to the war front to defend the vulnerable, as it were.

This is the quagmire that compelled Christopher Okigbo, the budding and short-lived Nigerian poet to his early demise in the Biafran frontline. This behaviour of substituting the pen for the gun might sound abnormal, but the society that the writer finds her/himself which compelled them to play this unwilling role is anything but normal. Abnormal behaviour does occur in an abnormal environment but what distinguishes a writer in such ‘unprofessional’ role is that she/he is temporarily involved and if she/he survives through to tell the story, she/he retreats back to the pen career or get consumed like Okibgo was. In a state where the ruler constitutes a terror to the people, the writer finds it irresistible to sometimes physically oppose such arrant excesses.

In the literature of African experience, the list of writers who were victims of state persecution for reasons of participating in anti-state movements or got webbed in the confusion of state decadence while substituting their pens for weapons of violence or taking sides with the oppressed is long. Christopher Okigbo, the renowned poet, died fighting on the side of defunct Biafra, Wole Soyinka was held captive by Nigerian forces during the bloody crisis that almost consumed the country for daring the gun-toting commanders; Dennis Brutus was haunted from apartheid South Africa into exile in 1966, Alex La Guma, the South African writer and anti-apartheid activist escaped with bullet wounds and Ezekiel Mphahlele’s role as a writer and political activist was also insidiously monitored by agents of police state in South Africa and narrowly escaped being slain by the apartheid regime.

The delicate, complex and controversial relationship of the writer and the state has continued to pervade critical debate and it is in the bid to decipher the symbiotic relationship between the writer and his society that Matthew Hart and Jim Hansen in their critical essay try to show the controversy that surrounds the writer’s place in the world of his creativity where the writer becomes politically involved:

A writer’s life is a highly vulnerable, almost naked activity. We don’t have to weep about that. The writer makes his choice and is stuck with
it. But it is true to say that you are open to all the wind, some of them icy indeed. You are out on your own, out on a limb. You find no shelter, no protection – unless you lie- in which case of course you have constructed your own protection and, it could be argued, become a politician. (Hart & Hansen 491)

Chinua Achebe’s autobiography testifies of the writer’s involvement in the organisation and prosecution of the Biafran cause. All this confirms the moment when the pen is substituted for the propagation of the cause that goes beyond the pen. This is the role that Achebe played in the context of his narrative on the civil war. His pen rather than being deployed for the intellection of cultural power and for the articulation of postcolonial dilemma for which he was better known, was temporarily substituted for prosecuting the cause of Biafra.

In his argument, Asein has stated convincingly that “literature may be used to sensitize an oppressed people and their sympathisers”, but not in “a glib expectation that literature will do the actual fighting”. What is suggested here essentially is that “through the catalytic effect of its message, a whole generation may be reoriented to appreciate the practical value of carrying guns and holding up radio stations”. (21-22) What is implied in the argument is that the writer should stick to his pen profession and leave the warlords to do what they know best, and that there is a power in the pen that could trigger resistance among the oppressed against their oppressors.

This latter role, Achebe did fulfil in his earlier works such as Thing Fall Apart (1958) Arrow of God (1964), through A Man of the People (1966), and in many other writings on the postcolonial condition. Without necessarily carrying guns in the cause of Biafra, Achebe did deviate from the pen career as a writer to actively participate in deciding the direction of the war he believed was a just cause. But most essentially, the writer is built up to pursue peaceful means of social reform and such a role may not augur well in a change process that is violent and bloodstained. The works of such writers as Wole Soyinka, Ngugi wa Thiong ‘o and others in one way or the other relate to the insidiousness of colonial violence spilling over into the messy state of postcolonial Africa. These radical and revolutionary creative initiatives of African writers simply demonstrate the transformative role that literature and indeed, the African writer can play in society’s reformation as part of the commitment to the entrenchment of an egalitarian order and socio-economic advancement of society.

Beyond the aesthetic value of literature, writers in the African environment have come to imbibe revolutionary and transformational functions of literature in society,
especially so because of the peculiarities of African experience in her history. It is the repercussions of this peculiar history that the writer of There Was a Country adds to interpret and illuminate so that the present generation may be better guided and that the leadership may be awakened to the reality of the present world. The narration in the book eloquently attests to the author’s sound knowledge of this history and the politics of postcolonial Nigerian nationhood.

This autobiographical testimony constitutes another dimension in the multi-faceted prism from which others have earlier used to configure the events in our national life that have made Nigeria to be where it has been since independence. Achebe’s mind could be better captured from the aspect of Jung’s psychoanalytic theory in which, as Azunoye explains, a writer becomes wholly absorbed or bound up “with individual’s total awareness of himself as a distinctive being.” (30) Others have given their verdict of the war before Achebe, and the present text does not seem to suggest the last to be written about the war, yet the controversy rages on.

Again, the African writer, who is entangled in the confusions and contradictions of the ‘postcolonial’ atmosphere, as Osofisan would have it, is committed to shaping awareness and furnishing the right perspective towards breaking the cycle of fate that colonialism inflicted on African history. (Asein 13-14) The communal world or the community is paramount to the writer in the African environment. Literature is therefore involved in as a service to community, and anything less would be anomalous to the African writer. Tanure Ojaide rightly states that, “the African writer has been nurtured in a society in which the sense of community is very strong”. (45) The writer of commitment is politicised because literature forms a crucial part of the socio-economic development of the human community. There Was a Country is therefore a Curriculum Vitae of a literary enterpriser, a nationalist and visionary who over the years has committed his energy, talent and nationalistic zeal in pursuit of the task of historical repair and national reconstruction, and that is what his testimony in this text portrays.

The advantage of the autobiographical testimony is that life is emphasised “as a process, in contrast with views that focus on a more static picture of experience with the “I”witness point of view (Brockmeier 247) which serves to affirm narrative authority. It is non-fictional and therefore gives the autobiographer the opportunity to speak out with a ‘human voice’ and also identify with the cause of societal struggles, in the attempt to re-validate experience or re-construct the past. As the voice of the community, the autobiographical mode is important as a collective memory because the author as Remy Oriaku states “represent the collective ‘life’ or experiences of a group, class or community of which the narrator-protagonist is only
a significant member”. (98) In this respect, There Was a Country represents an artist’s sober retreat, a deviation from mere imaginary to the roots and origins of the experience that came with the Nigerian civil war to show how it affected and continues to affect the Igbo ethnic nationality of Eastern Nigeria till the present.

The anguish perceived in There Was a Country shows that the wounds of the war with the multifarious ‘casualties’, which J. P. Clark-Bekedermo (1970) highlights, are yet fresh in the national psyche and especially of those who suffered greatly during the war. Going by the stirrings that the book created in the community of writers, intellectuals, politicians, and even demonstrated in the invectives of ethnic jingoists, it could be deduced that the nagging issues about the war and the fragility of Nigerian nationhood at the moment still gather dust. This underscores the point that the African writer is faced with the dilemma of balancing literary activities with the task of safeguarding the welfare of society against the excesses of the powerful. The African writer, Zulu Sofola asserts, is also burdened with deep concern with the disequilibrium in the social order which threatens existence, “particularly human existence”. (4) Sofola defines the role of the African writer as an embodiment of creative force, a cultural influence and politically engaging personality, and indentifies the roles of the African writer as including: To heal and restore the life of a sick and battered humanity; to create a new vision for growth, renewal, regeneration and edification of man for a wholesome life and a better community; and to mobilise a collective conscience for a particular desired objective. (4)

Indeed, Hart and Hansen quoted above do raise the question as to whether those artists who use an ideologically charged medium can ever really separate their careers between the realms of politics and literature. Chidi Maduka states that the post-independent African state “has been grossly distorted by colonialism and post-independent decadent governments of Africa” and adds that “the writers are caught up in a drama of social change characterised by a feverish quest for a regenerated Africa....” (6) From the historical prism of Thing Fall Apart, Arrow of God, and A Man of the People, the evolution of Nigerian contemporary experience has been mapped to highlight ‘where the rains started to beat Africa’ in her circle of infamy and backwardness that now sometimes makes the writer go ‘extra-mile’ in the patriotic attempt to bring the desired socio-economic transformation to fruition.

But in There Was a Country, there is no artistic ‘pretension’ of Emerson’s “aesthetic distance” by which he means “the observing self must be distanced from what it perceives if art is to happen.” (640) Literature is in the present circumstance becoming more and more a tool of political pressure and propaganda because of the dire situation that the writers find themselves in their societies. The African writer
has come to utilise every medium and genre of literature for the purpose of deepening social sensitisation and for intellectual engagement with contemporary African socio-political reality.

In this book, Achebe gives a graphic account of Nigeria’s experience from colonial backgrounds to African nation-states generally and specifically points the circumstances of the emergence of the Nigerian nation as a colonial legacy with all its troubles. The Nigerian condition that Achebe writes about could just be duplicated in other African nations with the exception of only a few. In the narrative, he asserts thus:

> Africa’s postcolonial disposition is the result of a people who have lost their habit of ruling themselves. We have also had difficulty running the new system foisted upon us at the dawn of independence by our “colonial masters”... A meaningful solution will require the goodwill and concerted efforts on the part of all those who share the weight of Africa’s historical burden. (2)

Achebe openly blames the continued incidence of state failure on inability to “appraise and reappraise... the paths and destinies” by thinking ahead while correcting the wrongs of the past. (252) Meredith affirms that the crisis that became pervasive in post-independent Nigerian experience was that “… politicians on all sides whipped up ethnic fear, jealousy for their own advantage and to entrench themselves in power, [and] tribalism became the ideology of politics.” (194) This condition is what gradually deteriorated into the bloodthirstiness that marked the pogrom of which Achebe, as a representative voice of the Igbo nation in the war, witnessed the full gravity of that gloomy experience. His book is a narrative of the account as told by those who really felt the anguish of it quite different from that of those who watched from a distance. He could therefore feel the anguish of this memory, and in writing this book, he simply pours out his heart to let the world know the story of Biafra and the repercussions of this history. As a seasoned story teller and accomplished writer, he brings his skill to bear on this historical context and bears his mind with full weight of boldness and sincerity, not finding occasion to mince words.

But the war having been fought and won, after the ‘no victor, no vanquished’ pronouncement at the end of it in early 1970, Achebe points at the wounds of the war to show the point that is still festering and pinching as a reminder and as a pointer to the future. He puts the scenario of the independent anxiety, the budding hope of a new dawn and what did become the nation soon after the twilight of his elevation to self-rule and nationhood that turned to stillbirth:
It has often been said that my generation was a very lucky one... the rate of development, with villages transforming into towns, or the coming of modern comforts, such as electricity or running water or modes of transportation, but more of a sense that we were standing figuratively and literary at the dawn of a new era. My generation was summoned, as it were, to bear witness to two remarkable transitions-the first the aforementioned impressive economic, social and political transformation ... But more profoundly, two decades later we were thrust into the throes of perhaps Nigeria’s greatest twentieth-century moment- our elevation from a colonised country to an independent nation.... (40)

This portrait of the post-independent Nigerian situation reflects the stark realities of disillusionment and despair. The writer sees in the tendency to politically dominate the rest of society by one section of the nation as a carryover from the colonial masters who paved the way for their stooges to commandeer the commonwealth to the detriment of building a great and indivisible nation. In the midst of this struggle for power at the centre by the big three majority and powerful ethnic groups (Igbo, Hausa-Fulani and Yoruba), the writer visualises that minority nationalities were made victims of ‘divide- and- rule’ with the discrepancies that have continued to trail Nigerian nation. Achebe tries to capture this in his narrative:

The minorities of the Niger Delta, Midwest, and the Middle Belt regions were always uncomfortable with the notion that they had to fit into the tripod of the largest ethnic groups that was Nigeria- Hausa/Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo. Many of them - Ijaw, Kanuri, Ibibio, Tiv, Itshekiri, Isan, Urhobo, Anang, and Efik- were from ancient nation states in their own right... The British were aware of the inter-ethnic tensions and posturing for power among the three main ethnic groups.... (47)

What the author simply states here is that Nigerian independent nationhood was ill-conceived, lopsided and stillborn, but in favour of the watching colonial masters who capitalise on the confusion to plunder. He points out clearly that “In a sense, Nigerian independence came with a British governor-general in command”, and his conclusion sequel to this arrangement is that “one might say, popular faith in genuine democracy was compromised from its birth”. (51) To complicate this situation of post-independent Nigeria, Achebe rightly points out that apart from the British manipulation of the transitional process from colonial domination to independent statehood, the first six years witnessed a steady decline in socio-economic and political life in which Nigeria fast became notorious as “a cesspool of corruption and misrule”. (51) With this historical scenario the author tries to ‘justify’
the birth of Biafra as a child of circumstance and evidence of failed leadership and collapsed national structure.

While yet denying the unfortunate war as a better option for solving the myriads of aggravated national problems, the author implies that it would be incomprehensible to think that the Easterners would just stand by and watch as thousands of Nigerians of Igbo stock were being massacred, hacked down and hunted by the rest of the country while the government showed acute incapacity to handle the anarchical order. The other factor he diagnoses is that the two main actors in the war namely, Yakubu Gowon and Odumegwu Ojukwu, were egoistically adamant on their grandstanding, while the Nigerian soldiers continued to wreak havoc on unarmed citizens they saw as arch enemies. He states that in 1969 as a result of federal government’s blockades and in the last count between one and three million people died in the Biafra enclave due to this inhuman policy on the federal side.

Achebe uses this grim scenario to picture what he considers an act of genocide against Easterners, mainly Igbo. He maps this wanton theatre at Asaba front, at Calabar and at other locations where federal troops unleashed havoc on thousands of unarmed civilian refugees mostly women and children all in attempt to highlight the anomalies of the war. By frequently recalling the ludicrous sights of infants and unarmed civilians with tattered clothes fleeing from to nowhere in the Biafra war zones, dying in droves, killed by federal war planes or cut down, lynched or decapitated with machetes by federal soldiers and their civilian supporters under the watchful eyes of their commanders, he portrays the war as a crime against the Igbo that should have been redressed by now. Going by this and many other atrocities committed against the Easterners, Achebe asserts his deep sense of disappointment stating: “My feeling towards Nigeria was one of profound disappointment” especially because the federal government sat and let it happen”. (71) It is this abiding sense of disappointment over the Nigerian project that has compelled There Was a Country so that living might learn some lessons from this historical memory.

**Conclusion**
The feeling gathered from *There was a Country* exudes a reminder to the Nigerian leadership especially and the followership generally of our past that still haunts the present and even threatens the future. This past sticks to our national psyche. The discussion so far demonstrates the sensibility of Chinua Achebe as a writer with a deep sense of history, a statesman who sticks close to his own identity, bold and courageous with an abiding sense of nationalism and patriotism. His memoir further demonstrates his deep sense of disappointment over the failed opportunities to transform Nigeria into a formidable entity. *There Was a Country* obviously stems
from a firm belief in the Nigerian project of which successive leaderships have been slammed with historical indictment. The diagnoses of the root causes and circumstances of our national malaise highlighted in this memoir underscores his uncommon ability and clear-cut discernment of the issues that are of benefit for national development in Nigeria and indeed, African nations generally.

He has pointed severally at the implications of the British policy of amalgamation, solidified in the indirect rule system and many questions that have continued to bug the nation’s history, overflowing from what Ogundowole terms the colonial “denationalisation policy”, which is described as the bane of the Nigerian state. (viii) Nwagbara also echoes this when he avers that colonial Nigeria was grounded on an anvil of colonial violence, and that Nigeria’s postcolonial contradictions stem principally from this historical trajectory. (122) But in pointing at these festering sore-points of our national experience, Achebe has used his autobiography to further illuminate the way out of the present embarrassing debris of infamous history to a glorious future of indivisible and strong nation.

He has in this story made eloquent testimony of what he witnessed during the war, inside Biafran enclave and also told the story of the complications of the politics of Nigerian nationhood. He has gone further to interpret the lapses of the war, the untold experiences of those who were caught in the midst of it, standing on his firsthand points of view in his attempt to narrate what the war means to those were caught up in the midst of it. The fact that this book came out at the time it did, and as soon as it came he passed on, shows that he lived for a vision and died in the active service to humanity and to his nation of which the living must sincerely reflect on these knotty issues raised in this book.

Works Cited


