

Book Review

Looking beyond Biafra, Facing Nigeria's Posterity: A review of Chinua Achebe's *There was a Country*

The intellectual uproar that greeted the Chinua Achebe's master piece was what triggered my attention and spurred my interest to flip through the pages of the book. When I first heard of an historical account of the most trying moment in the history of Nigeria, the Biafra war, published by a renowned author, I thought finally someone has risen to the challenge of uniting Nigeria against the ethnic divides that led to the war in the wake of 1966. I thought Achebe had tried to recreate the history of his motherland Nigeria and used the civil war as a tool to reintegrate Nigeria since he belonged to the generation of writers in Africa that was preoccupied with recreating the history of their individual countries to correct the negative impression created by the white colonialists that Africa or Nigeria had no civilization before their arrival.

I was however rather disappointed because his too much concentration on the ethnic divides is disheartening and very unbecoming of a first generation writer and a nationalist in Nigeria. Achebe begins what he calls his personal history of Biafra with issues surrounding his coming of age as well as the attainment of independence in Nigeria. Here, he paints a picture of a utopian society in Nigeria, which although has many ethnic groups, diverse cultures and traditions, still holds itself as one. In the later chapters of the book, it becomes obvious that Achebe has reservations for the leadership of the country since his kinsmen from the Igbo race have little or no control in the activities of the nation then. He concentrates more on the civil war where, in his opinion, the Igbo race suffered a great loss and dehumanizing situations perpetrated by the then federal government of Nigeria through its military force. Achebe concludes his personal history of Biafra, *There was a Country* with what I will call a lament for the present state of the nation with the view that the nation has suffered continual backwardness as a result of what in his view is the continuous ostracizing of his kinsmen the Igbo race from the country:

There are tons of treaties that talk about how the Igbo were wonderfully integrated into Nigeria. Well, I have news for them: the Igbo were not and continue not to be reintegrated into Nigeria, one of the main reasons for the country's continued backwardness in my own estimation.

Achebe's views and standpoint might be justified, because having passed through the negative and bitter experiences of the civil war, a reader shouldn't expect less from him. However, a close reading of the book will reveal to the reader a man who has expressed his bias for the Igbos and against Nigeria. Also from his statement above, the reader will get the impression of an unpatriotic Nigerian who many years after the civil war still believes that his country is not united because a race is yet to be integrated back into the country and he sees this lack of integration as the main reason for the country's backwardness. It would have been enough in my view if he had not added that the backwardness of the country will continue unless the Igbo race is integrated back into Nigeria.

In conclusion, the implication of what Achebe has done in *There was a Country* is to concentrate more on the ethnic divides in Nigeria, such as seeing a race as superior to the other and this amongst other reasons is the same internal issue that ignited the war. As an renowned author of African writing and one who believes in using literature especially in Africa to help Africa regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self abasement which he has duly expressed in his essay "The Novelist as a Teacher", one would expect Achebe to use his intellectual prowess and carriage to guide the upcoming generations of Nigerian children against the evil consequences of ethnocentrism. As much as the book could be justified from its title as being the author's very personal history of Biafra, it however remains a wrong, biased and unbalanced account of the Biafra war experiences. In his argument and the presentation of happenings during the Biafra war, Achebe fails in the role of leadership bestowed on him by history and posterity and in the words of the great freedom fighter Nelson Mandela, "a good leader can engage in a debate frankly and thoroughly knowing that at the end, he and the other side must be closer, and thus emerge stronger. You don't have that idea when you are arrogant, superficial and unformed".

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