

## History and the Challenges of Nation-Building: A Critical Appraisal of Readers' Comments on Chinua Achebe's *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra*

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*The aim of this paper is to critically appraise reactions to Chinua Achebe's There was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra, an account of the Nigerian-Biafran civil strife that has generated a lot of readership and controversies. The book since its first appearance in 2012 has been subjected to a number of critical interpretations. Some of the interpretations to the book and their underlying effects on contemporary efforts at nation building in Nigeria were examined in this study. A total of five responses to the book were randomly selected and generalizations made. Deploying the literary tool of Historicism from the works of Wilhelm Dilthey, the paper submits that each of the ripostes from the standpoint of the critic is significantly aimed at overcoming identified challenge(s) of nation building in Nigeria. It argues that a very important shared point from the critical interpretations is that they underscore the relevance of history in addressing the contemporary challenges of nation building in Nigeria. The paper concludes that *There was a Country* draws from Nigeria's history and this makes it Achebe's contribution to Nigeria's nation building process. Beyond ethnic and bigoted affiliations therefore, the book must be given a nationalist interpretation if the numerous challenges bedeviling Nigeria's nation building process as highlighted by Chinua Achebe will ever be overcome.*

### Introduction

*'[L]iterature involves our deepest responses to the facts of human existence and intervenes in those areas of experience where we assume consciousness of our situation with regard to others and to the world'. -Abiola Irele, *The African Experience in Literature and Ideology**

*The Essential Matter of History is not What Happened but What People Thought or Said about It. Fredric W. Maitland. (English Lawyer, Writer and Critic)*

Many controversies and debates surround the Nigeria-Biafra civil war. Since the execution of the war between 1967 and 1970, some Nigerians who took part in it, witnessed it, have heard it or read about it, have debated and different opinions have been expressed on the war. In recent times, especially at the turn of the 21st century, the war has remained topical in national discourses and as it is experienced in Nigeria today, its continuous discussion has threatened to cause disunity in Nigeria. The controversies that continue to trail the civil strife, makes it utmost in national interest to revisit history and examine the issues that led to the war some of which since then have continued to weigh on the nation building process and have also continued to affect the peaceful coexistence of different ethnic nationalities in the nation. Chinua Achebe attempted to do this in his last historical piece, *There was a Country*.

Tagged 'A Personal History of Biafra', *There was a Country* presents Chinua Achebe's thoughts on the events that led to the war in a bid to address contemporary challenges bedeviling the nation building process in Nigeria. Perceivably, he feels the necessity to pen

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down the challenging moments in Nigeria's historical development for it to serve as lessons that will guide contemporary and upcoming generations. In his words, 'It is for the sake of the future of Nigeria, for our children and grand children, that I feel it is important to tell Nigeria's story, Biafra's story, our story, my story' (3). Largely historical and political, *There was a Country* serves a key purpose and function of literature which is to establish human desires and expand frontiers of possibilities. This intersection between literature, history and politics is explained on the premise that they all envision a positive and utopian society. The writer is subscribed to and he seeks to create this in his work. As such, in pursuit of human perfection, every artistic piece incorporates elements of history, literature and politics. Matthew Arnold submits in this regards that literature is a 'free creative activity [...] the highest function of man' (11). This is what drives Chinua Achebe's submission in *There was a Country* as he seeks to deconstruct the traditional boundaries of fiction and non-fiction to incorporate modern tenets of interpretation, interrogation and criticism.

No doubt, Achebe as a nationalist writer understood the roles of literature to affirm human dispositions and aspirations, thus justifying the reference to modern form of writing as all encompassing in a bid to apprehend human desires, mean something to human spirit and as well shape patterns of life with great uproar. *There was a Country* encapsulates this. Divergent views have been and are still being expressed on the book and this in my view makes it the most read and most criticized account of the civil war.

No sooner than it was published in 2013, *There was a Country* became the point source for different critics, literary and non-literary. The presentations made in the book coupled with its structuring into four parts; the first three on the past and the last on contemporary situations in Nigeria make it relevant to contemporary nationhood challenges in Nigeria. As it will be revealed later in this study, the different critics that breathe life into *There was a Country* through their conscientious criticisms bear in their minds history and its implications for nation building. This is predicated on the notion that the criticism and interpretation of any artistic piece, historical or fictive is captured from multiple contexts or interpreted from a variety of perspectives. Some of the responses generated by *There was a Country* will be critically examined in relation to nation-building process and national cohesion in Nigeria.

### Problematic

Literature (especially in its written form) serves as social history. It records the past, engages the present and hypothesizes a possible future. This makes it living. However, the tendency is for a possible (mis)interpretation of any artistic piece against the primary motif of the literary artist. Such is the nature of the reception to Chinua Achebe's historical cum literary piece, *There Was a Country* since its publication in 2012. The clear statement of his intent in writing the book did not spare it and by extension the author from largely the myriad of negative criticisms that greeted the book. This is the crux of this research. Here, I hope to examine some reactions and readers' comments to Achebe's *There Was a Country* and their implications for nation building efforts in Nigeria.

### Summary of *There Was a Country*

The three hundred and thirty three paged book (postscript, appendix, notes and index inclusive) is divided into four parts. Chinua Achebe brings his wealth of experiences to bear as he assiduously traced the historical cum political development of Nigeria. In the first part, the author presents the beginning of the beginnings. He presents to the reader his family background, his educational background, and his early debut as a writer. He further delved into the antecedent of and the issues surrounding Nigeria's political independence, the activities of the early nationalists and leaders in the post independent Nigeria, where he talks about the 1966 coup and the counter coup.

The second part of the book examined the Nigerian-Biafran war. In this segment, the author reviews the position of Biafra, the roles played by different organizations during the war and the roles played by different writers and intellectuals during the war. He also gave the account of his personal roles in ensuring the survival of Biafra by travelling far and near as an unofficial envoy of Biafra and serving in the Biafran Organization of Freedom Fighters, BOFF, an establishment of the former Biafran leader, Col. Dim Chukwuemeka Ojukwu. In the third part of the book, Achebe gave the account of his experiences, the experiences of Biafrans after the war. He reexamined the neglect suffered by Biafrans, the economic blockade and starvation, the genocide claim by the Igbos and ultimately, the collapse of Biafra. In the last part, the author examined the fallout of the war, and the different postcolonial issues affecting Nigeria as a sovereign state.

In all, the issues presented by Chinua Achebe in *There was a Country* are in tandem with his preoccupation as a nationalist writer. The arguments support his belief of using literature 'to create for Nigeria an environment of good order and a civilization – a daunting task that needed to be tackled in a country engulfed in crisis' (57). A nationalist interpretation of the book will as such go a long way to quench the flames of ethnic and bigoted interpretations that has been hovering over it. His yearnings to see his society become a better and safer abode are what *There was a Country* stands for. My submission here is that if the lessons in *There Was a Country* can be absorbed and fully implemented, they will go a long way to discourage a re-occurrence of catastrophic events such as the civil strife between 1967 and 1970 anywhere in the nation.

### History of the Nigerian Civil War

The Nigerian Civil War, in other discourses referred to as the Nigeria-Biafra war or the Biafran war, is a major and landmark event that marked a turnaround in the political, social and economic history of Nigeria. As a defining moment in Nigeria's political history, it is important to take a critical look at the war in this study. This is because *There Was a Country*, is tagged a personal history of Biafra in which the author from his own standpoint narrates events of the war. Very significantly, it is important to also note that there exists a myriad of different accounts of the war by different authors. One then wonders why every critic picks on Achebe's account of the war. As the situations and events surrounding the war remain a question of 'Ifs', the war will remain trending in national discourses in a bid to foster nationalism and advance nation building efforts in Nigeria.

The thirty month's hostilities that lasted between 1967 to 1970 was fought to counter and prevent the secession of the then Eastern part of Nigeria from the Federal Republic of Nigeria as the Republic of Biafra. Following the declaration by Colonel Chukwuemeka Odimegu Ojukwu, on the 30th of May, 1967 proclaiming the independence of the Republic of Biafra from Nigeria, the war proper started later in July 1967. It was preceded earlier in January 1966 by what Alexander A. Madiebo called the Nigerian Revolution.

On the 15th of January 1966, a group of young military officers led by Major Chukwuma Nzeogwu in Kaduna North Western Nigeria staged a military coup d'état in which some of the nation's top civilian leaders and military officers were killed. Some of those killed include Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa (Prime Minister), Alhaji Ahmadu Bello (Premier of the Northern Region), Chief Festus Okotie (Federal Minister of Finance), Chief Samuel Ladoke Akintola (Premier of the Western Region), Brigadier Zakariya Maimalari (Commander Second Brigade, Nigerian Army), Colonel Abogo Lar-gema (Commanding Officer Fourth Battalion, Nigerian Army), among others. Alexander Madiebo reports that in a chat with Nzeogwu after the coup on 16th January 1966, Nzeogwu explains that, 'the aim of his revolution was to get rid of the corrupt and incorrigible politicians and have them replaced with true nationalists. He regretted that it had become necessary to use force to do this when it could have been done through a democratic election – a system which was no longer possible in Nigeria' (19).

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Unknown to Nzeogwu, the reality that as the leader of the coup, he is from the Eastern Region and also that most of the casualties of the coup were from the north sparked the opinion that it was an Igbo coup staged by the Igbo military officers in their bid to hijack the leadership of the nation. Arthur Okonkwo writes that 'The ethnic distribution of the casualties of the coup led to the allegation that it was an Ibo coup...it did not take much talent to convince the people of Northern Nigeria that the Ibos were planning to dominate and colonize them' (13). Achebe puts it forward that 'But by killing Sir Ahmadu Bello, Nzeogwu and other coup plotters had put themselves on a collision course with religious, ethnic, and political ramifications of such an action, something they had clearly not thought through sufficiently' (79). This was compounded by the introduction of the unitary system of government by the new Head of State, General Johnson Aguyi Ironsi who is also from the Eastern Region. The following months therefore witnessed a massive and gruesome killings of the Easterners (particularly the Igbos) residing in the northern part of the country in retaliation to the January coup. Those killed included General Johnson Aguyi Ironsi who was arrested and later killed (alongside Colonel Adekunle Fajuyi) for his alleged complicity in the January coup. Achebe opines that 'If it had ended there, the matter might have been seen as a very tragic interlude in nation building, a horrendous tit for tat. But the Northerners turned on Igbo civilians living in the North and unleashed waves of brutal massacres' (82).

Subsequently, on the 30th of May, 1967, Colonel Chukwuemeka Odimegu Ojukwu, the governor of the Eastern Region with the full backing of the Eastern Region Consultative Assembly declared the independence of the Republic of Biafra from Nigeria. Alexander Madiebo writes that 'On the 27th of May, the Consultative Assembly mandated Colonel Ojukwu to declare at the earliest predictable date, Eastern Nigeria a free sovereign and independent state by the name and title of the Republic of Biafra' (93). In the words of Achebe,

On May 30, 1967, Ojukwu citing a variety of malevolent acts directed at the mainly Igbo Easterners – such as pogrom that claimed over thirty thousand lives; the federal government's failure to ensure the safety of Easterners in the presence of organized genocide; and the direct incrimination of the government in the murders of its own citizens – proclaimed the independence of the Republic of Biafra from Nigeria, with the full backing of the Eastern House Constituent Assembly. By taking this action, Ojukwu had committed us to full blown war. Nigeria would never be the same again. (92)

By this declaration, the Nigerian Head of State, General Yakubu Gowon declared a police action to counter the secessionist move of the Easterners. This police action later degenerated into the war which will not end until January 15th, 1970.

During the war, the many moves that were made for a peaceful resolution fell on deaf ears. Some of these moves which included, The Aburi Accord, the mediation by different international organizations and countries like the Organization of African Unity (OAU), United States of America, France and Britain all suffered setbacks as a result of the unpreparedness of the leaders from both sides to reach a truce and end the war. It has been argued in some quarters that the seniority tussle and rivalry between the leaders of both side (i.e. Gowon and Ojukwu) who were both trained at the Sandhurst Military School compounded the entire war situations.

Eventually, with the fall of Owerri, the third capital of Biafra after Enugu and Umuahia respectively and Colonel Ojukwu's inability to sustain the Biafran agitation as well as the spirit to fight as a result of the lack of arms and ammunitions for the Biafran troops, the war ended on the 15th of January 1970, when the Biafran delegation officially surrendered to the Nigerian government. Achebe puts it thus, 'A day later, on January 15, 1970, the Biafran delegation which was led by Major General Philip Effiong, Sir Louis Mbanefo, Colonel David Ogunewe,

M.T Mbu and other Biafran military officers officially surrendered at Dodan Barracks to the troops of the Federal Republic of Nigeria' (226-7).

Through out the annals of Nigeria's history, no event has ever been as disastrous and catastrophic as the Nigeria-Biafra civil war. The colossal destruction and the damages of lives and properties during the war are so great that the country as a whole is yet to recover from it. The two sides of the war (i.e. Nigeria and Biafra) suffered a huge loss of life which has been put at a figure, a little above three million lives. This loss is however greater on the Biafran side where three million lives were lost. Achebe writes that 'In the end millions (some state upward of three million, mostly children) had died, mainly from starvation due to the federal government of Nigeria's blockade policies' (226). Economically, the Biafran side also suffered a great loss. The change of the legal tender by the Nigerian government from Pounds to Naira and the non-acceptance of the Biafran Pound outside the Biafran borders meant that Biafra was economically handicapped. Transactions outside Biafra were done in other legal tenders. After the collapse of Biafra in 1970, the twenty pound to a naira exchange policy further impoverished the Igbos. This is because this exchange rate is not on equitable terms and the Biafrans lost more pounds in exchange for a few nairas.

In all, the different accounts of the war have revealed that ever since the colorful mosaic of the history of Black Africa, the war remains one of the most bloody, most devastating and most destructive events. Achebe writes that, '...the Biafran war changed the course of Nigeria. In my view it was a cataclysmic experience that changed the history of Africa' (2). Alexander Madiebo opines that 'the war is a catastrophe of a great magnitude that has never occurred anywhere in Black Africa' (xii). Olusegun Obasanjo in *My Command* reacts that considering the magnitude of the destruction during the war, Nigerians must collectively say never again. Others such as Fredrick Forsyth in *The Biafran Story*, Adewale Ademoyega in *Why We Struck*, Arthur Okonkwo in *Nigeria: The Challenge of Biafra*, and John de St Jorre in *The Brothers' War: Biafra and Nigeria*, among others, all subscribe to this view. It can only be hoped that sufficient lessons have been learnt from the experiences of the war so as to discourage and prevent a re-occurrence of any war in Nigeria and, by extension, Africa. One of the surest ways in which Nigerians can truly prevent a re-occurrence of the hostilities experienced during the Nigeria-Biafra war is by re-examining some of the challenges that led to the war and the underlying effect that they have on nation building efforts in contemporary Nigerian society.

### Theoretical Insight

The theory that forms the theoretical background for this paper is historicism. The approach that will be deployed will be based on the works of Wilhelm Dilthey. The central claim of Dilthey's theorization on history and historicism is that human traditions, interpretations, including all other concepts are cultural objects of particular time and place. The concern of the historian as such is to establish the accuracy of human past in the sense of corresponding reality and take an objective stance to allow people see the truth about people, events and places. As such, historicism recognizes that there is a past, and we view this past from a historical standpoint which is conditioned by the reality of the ever changing human society and situations in history.

The complicated events of human existence as such are classified, correlated, explained and judged by the changing experiences of human history. As such, if the writing and presentation of history implies that the historian choose facts which are determined by certain criteria, he also discovers new facts and make generalizations by which he classifies and understands these facts. As such, facts cannot be understood and evaluated except in relation to categories and values – political and socio-economic – to which the historian generally refers. Boasting of absolute certainty in this case is as such an impossible task. Accordingly, Wilhelm Dilthey submits that 'the historical consciousness of the finiteness of every historical phenomenon, every human or social condition, and of the relativity of every kind of belief,

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gives man the sovereign power to appropriate the contents of every experience, to throw himself entirely into it, unprejudiced, as if there were not any system of philosophy or belief which could bind men'.

It is on this premise that Dilthey presses as far as possible toward the goal of concluding that all experience and knowledge are never of any independently existing reality, but only of cultural forms that have been created. I conclude, therefore, that historicism is self-performatively incoherent in addition to being self-referentially and self-assumptively incoherent. Moreover, these incoherencies appear to lie at the heart of the historicist claim and not merely to attack what is dispensable to it or peculiar only to this or that version of it.

### **Reactions to *There Was a Country* and their implications for Nationhood**

Noo Saro Wiwa believes that no writer is better placed than Achebe to tell the history of the Nigeria from socio-cultural and political perspectives. This is from the understanding that Nigeria's problems are historical and political. A frustrated nation, Nigeria's failure to understand and learn from history is pushing her gradually towards disintegration. There is therefore the need for a radicalization to save the nation. Achebe in *There Was a Country* thus leads a radicalization process for the utopia Nigeria. In his view, *There Was a Country* is as such Achebe's lament for Nigeria. It is a lament because it describes the unstable situation of a nation which is yet to fulfill its potentials.

Recognizing that Nigeria, as a sovereign state, is yet to fulfill its potentials displays a great sense of nationalism. This is against the blasphemous notion that Nigeria is a developing nation. Nigeria is not developing. As a point in fact, rather than develop and advance, Nigeria appears to be retrogressing. The starry reality is that Nigeria is yet to fulfill her potentials as a sovereign state and there is even not a single signal in that regards as she has allowed herself to be bedridden by issues of ethnic loyalty and tribal affiliations ahead of national interests. Nigeria and Nigerians must acknowledge and work to eschew tribal and ethnic affiliations if any meaningful drive will be made towards national cohesion, unity and development.

Pelu Awofeso in a review titled 'The Way We Lived' argues that the book *There Was a Country* is Achebe's story about Nigeria's long spell with bad and visionless leadership. Nigeria since her political independence in 1960 has had to grapple with incessant leadership failure. The failure of 'Uhuru' in Nigeria birthed different postcolonial issues and at the wake of 1966/67 these issues tragically turn the history of the country around. Awofeso laments that after the political independence of Nigeria from her colonial masters, she is yet to find her political bearing as a result of corruption, ethnicity and the pursuit of self agenda as against the pursuit of national creed and development by the political and ruling class. All of these national ills rather than subside have boomed. This warranted his argument that it is impossible for a reader not to feel Achebe's grief summarized in *There Was a Country*. He concludes that *There Was a Country* is tribute to a glorious past of Nigeria which the country might not witness again unless faithful compatriots rise up and reclaim the dignity of the country from a leadership that appears to be disillusioned, deceitful, myopic, visionless and delusional.

This reaction to *There Was a Country* sees Chinua Achebe as praising Nigeria's glorious past. This past before the political independence which he Achebe witnessed and benefitted from makes him to weep for the country after 1960. Admitting that the problems bedeviling Nigeria did actually started in the past shows the strong commitment of the reviewer towards nation building and is a step in the right direction towards tackling the problems. A problem can only be solved when its origin and causes are known. This underscores the relevance of history in addressing contemporary problems in Nigeria. In the words of Achebe himself, 'a man who does not know where the rain began to beat him cannot say where he dried his body', (2). Unless Nigeria pays assiduous and a deliberate attention to her history, it will no doubt fall into the same pitfalls it had battled with since her independence. It is imperative to assert here that a nation that is still crawling as a result of its own undoing when most of her

contemporaries have gotten their names written in the annals of history as developed nation should blame nobody but itself. The way we lived and the way we are living will remain our greatest undoing unless true nationalists rise to the immediate and pressing challenge of nation building. The clarion call is for Nigerians to rise up to this challenge.

In a swift reaction, Arthur Anyaduba writes in 'The Other Side of History: Responding to Jeyifo's Reflection on Achebe's *There Was a Country*' that *There Was a Country* is a masterpiece. Its ability to generate a lot of controversies and responses gives credence to the author and the presentations made in *There Was a Country*. In his opinion, Chinua Achebe in *There Was a Country* interrogates the past, which has negatively weighed on the present. Achebe engages the present for a better future. The book in Arthur's submission is as such an important historical material in the attempt of the author to teach Nigerians to right the wrongs of Nigeria's history. It is only in learning this history that Nigeria can recover from the causes of the present challenges in nation building. A probable deduction from Arthur's submission above is that Achebe in *There Was a Country* underscores the efficacy of history in knowing the causes of the present challenges in Nigeria. In this regards, an understanding of the history of Nigeria and its avoidable pitfalls will no doubt chat a new course for contemporary efforts at nation building in Nigeria.

Babatope Falade reacted to *There was a Country* from the perspective of the roles of history in provoking new spheres of discussion about the past in the public space. As such, *There was a Country* in all ramifications meets the requirements that make it historical. The uproar the followed the publication of the book makes it in his view a 'Renaissance book of Nigeria's history'. It is Achebe's protest against the past and the present operational framework of tribal and ethnic existence in Nigeria. These issues which predate the existence of Nigeria have adversely affected the nation with centrifugal forces threatening to cause disunities and disintegrations. The hysteric responses to these ravaging issues are what Achebe protested against in *There was a Country*. Thus Falade's submission that all credits should go to Achebe for shedding light on the historical past of Nigeria which in turn has provoked a fervent and passionate discussion of the past with all its ugliness for a better future. *There Was a Country* as such recollects past of Nigeria with the aim of positively affecting the future.

Osaisonor Godfrey Ekhaton in 'There Was a Country: The Reminiscence of Nigeria-Biafra Civil War and Elites' Perception of Nation and Nationalism in Nigeria', admits that just like every other account of the civil war, *There Was a Country* has been greeted with different responses and reactions. These criticisms he says has underplayed the clarion call for nationalism in the book. According to him, *There Was a Country* is Chinua Achebe's conception of nationalism written to inspire in future Nigerians the spirit of nationalism and a value for the country's past. He further explains that although the memories of the civil war have disenchanted the spirit of nationalism in Nigerians, the onus now lies on the elites to pursue nationalism in Nigeria. He concludes that just like Achebe has done in *There Was a Country*, which according to him is a message to non-ethically biased mind, true nationalists and future generations, other elites should follow suit and Nigerians should be unbounded from all aprons of ethnic perceptions so as to reshape their social attitude.

The irony in the contemporary Nigerian society is that instead of advancing national cohesion and unity among the diversified ethnic nationalities in the present structuring of the country, the elites now fan the embers of discord, rancor, hatred and disunities. A recourse to history will reveal that the failure of the nationalists and elites in Nigeria immediately after independence to advocate for true nationalism against their promotion of ethnic nationalism became the nation's undoing. These same issues which plunged the nation into the civil strife barely six years after the political independence have become the basis for different secessionist agitations and sectarian violence that has become the bane of achieving an all inclusive nationalism in Nigeria.

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In all, the foregoing discussion submits that the different reactions and readers comments on *There Was a Country* notwithstanding, Chinua Achebe in the book demonstratively underscores the importance of a historical spirit towards national integration for engaging the present and engendering a reconciliatory spirit towards national integration for future generations of Nigerians. *There Was a Country* generally reminds Nigerians that the past still hunts the present and threatens the future, thus, the need for a positive readjustment. It apparently chides the bad state of the Nigerian political leadership in the country is therefore Achebe's quest for self-repair and national reconstruction. All the repositives gives credence to history as a powerful tool to overcome the contemporary challenges of nation building in Nigeria. A proper understanding of history is therefore non-negotiable to advance development in Nigeria.

### Conclusion

The presentation in this paper admits that *There Was a Country* has stirred up many emotions and this is responsible for the diverse comments and interpretation of the book. This it shares with other accounts of the civil war. These reactions have all contributed significantly to the popularity and the patronage that the book has received. *There Was a Country* is Chinua Achebe's thought on history with the sole aim of teaching the present and upcoming generations to avoid similar pitfalls that led to the civil strife between Nigeria and the secessionist Biafra in the wake of 1967. The arguments are organized along historical, national and ideological lines. History will vindicate the just that there was a Chinua Achebe who took passionately the paramount issue of bringing back on the track, a nation that has significantly wandered away from the landmark set by its founding fathers. His brilliant and courageous engagement with the disillusionment in his country as presented in *There Was a Country* is resounding and this makes the book a final gift to his nation, Nigeria.

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