

Obari Gomba

Tribute

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Things still apart: Chinua Achebe's whetstone

I grew up with knowledge of Chinua Achebe (1930–2013). I had read *Chike and the River* (1966) in early school, and the name stuck in my memory. Again, my elder brother and his mates loved to talk about *Things Fall Apart*. I felt it was a curious title at the time but my brother and his friends always talked glibly about the book. I recall that I had tried to make sense of the book. I flipped through my brother's copy. I could not comprehend it. It was too tough for my young head. Of course, *Things Fall Apart* was never meant to be a novel for boys, as Achebe said of *Chike and the River*. But I knew I would have to read it someday, if only to prove to my brother that his book was not beyond my ken. Not much later, the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) brought the book to most of us. The adaptation enthralled me at the time. There were only a few black-and-white television sets around. And the Nigerian Electric Power Authority (NEPA) had not given electricity to Eleme at the time. On each telecast schedule, the neighbourhood would gather at those few sites where we could watch it. With other children in my neighbourhood, I sat with adults to watch the dramatization of Achebe's great novel. It was always a solemn event. The adults did not give room for childish behaviour. It was as if a communal rite was on course, and the soul of the community was at stake. Many years later, I came to understand why each telecast had such ritual significance. Granted that a great number of us might not have known the importance of the book then, it was nonetheless our story. We bonded with the television set because it was our story. We might not have set about it in a deliberate way, but it reached to us as a retrieval of selves and community from the fog of history.

The effort of the NTA had a long impression on me until I got around to reading the novel. I noticed that the NTA had taken scandalous liberty with the text; and I did not think they had the right to deceive me in the name of adaptation. This, I confess, is a minority position. My country men have continued to praise the NTA for that effort, and they have continued to ask why the NTA had not continued to adapt other great novels by Achebe and others. It strikes me that the popularity of *Things Fall Apart* in Nigeria owes a great deal to the NTA. There are lots of Nigerians who have not read their country's greatest novel, but they can tell you the main thrust of the story of Okonkwo. And they are likely to tell you how that story intersects the past and present realities of the continent.

For many years, *Things Fall Apart* has defined our perception of the African novel. Some critics have made a doctrine of *the sons and the daughters* of Achebe. Baring the extremities of such a doctrine, there are valid points on how Achebe has come to influence writing on the continent. I confess that after reading *Things Fall Apart*, I too came to measure every other African novel by that template. After all I was a teenager at the time; and I was merely developing my sensitivity to literature. It is needless to say I was not alone. *Things Fall Apart* has come to become the quintessential novel to many a great critic. Even Achebe has laboured to get out of that mould. The variety of his oeuvre: *Things Fall Apart*, *A Man of the People*, *Arrow of God*, *Girls at War*, *No Longer at Ease*, *Anthills of the Savannah*, etc. has not helped Achebe to escape the charge of *unrelieved competence*, as Wole Soyinka has been wont to say. Achebe's reputation has survived such modes of interpretation. Some have ascribed this success to the privilege of Achebe's early start. But it cannot be that alone. He has paid his dues in craft and in context. He has attracted attention to himself and to African writing.

Achebe is not a lone tree that makes a forest. We shall not subscribe to such a mythology. If he were a lone tree, then his great work on the African Writers Series would have been in vain. It is a blessing that Achebe is not a lone tree that makes a forest. It is a blessing that the rise of Achebe has brought about the rise of many others, directly or indirectly. African literature is not homogenous in a strict sense. Africa is a rainbow of many colours. The challenge is for us to see the dimensions of Africa's diversity in the letters that bear the name of the continent. This understanding has become my own turning point as a critic. I came into this epiphany at Nsukka where I encountered Achebe's towering presence in spite of his absence.

The news of Achebe's life-changing accident came to me in my days in college. I heard about his relocation to the United States of America. Interestingly, when I got to the University of Nigeria, Nsukka in 1997 to pursue a degree in English, Achebe's mystique was still marked on the ambience of the university. His office was still there, hardly open, revered beyond measure like a sacred grove. Cobwebs lent to its grandeur. And there was *Okike*, the African journal of New Writing, which Achebe started after the civil war. We boasted then that *Okike* and *The Muse* were the longest surviving journals of literature on the continent. And we believed our boast. Till now, I have not made any attempt to check the veracity of that claim. *Okike*, in particular, is iconic because it represents the resilience of the human spirit. Out of the chaos of war, we got a great platform from the inimitable Achebe. In 1998, the English Association at Nsukka crowned me as the Best Literary Artiste of the Year. The editors of *Okike* honoured me with a one-year free subscription. I had all the issues of *Okike* for that year. I had come to enjoy the fruit of Achebe's labour and foresight in a very personal way.

I have held Achebe in awe for many years. Achebe means a lot to us. He means a lot to me. I consider his death as a kind of peak in his apotheosis. Call it bardolatry. There

has been a kind of godlike essence in the way I see him. Mind you, deities do not have to be perfect. In fact, the more flawed they are; the more we venerate them.

Last year, I published my fourth collection of poems, *Length of Eyes*. The first and the last poems in the collection are tributes to Achebe. In the heat of the debate on Achebe's *There Was a Country*, I wrote another poem, dedicated to Achebe and Odia Ofeimun. The poem has been published online on *Voice*, the Garden City Literary Festival blog. On World Poetry Day for 2013, I made a last minute decision not to read the poem to the audience at Le Meridian Port Harcourt. Achebe died the following day. I refused to make any comment in the media on Achebe for weeks. The death was such a weight on my mind. I just could not talk to the media about it. When I finally loosened my tongue, it came out crappy for no fault of mine. I captured the situation on Facebook. Let me cite a portion of my post:

Last week, a journalist from *The Nation* showed up in my office to get my view on the person of Achebe. The result of that conversation was out last Thursday, 23 May 2013. It was horrible. The transcription was horrible. If it were in the past, I would have fumed about the piece, to say nothing about the misspelling of my name and the detestable photograph of me. But I have chosen to laugh about it. On the same day, I called Betty Abah, the poet(ess), and we had a good laugh. I have also called the said journalist. I expressed my disappointment in a mild manner; and I invited him to an evening of beer. We could not make it to the pub. Port Harcourt traffic. We shall make another arrangement soon. While I wait for a beer date with my journalist, I have become busy with a tribute on Achebe for a journal. I hope it comes out good. I began by stating the obvious. Achebe means a lot to us. Today, he has gone to join the ancestors. We shall all miss his interventions. We live in a country that is in dire need of interventions. We live in a world that is in dire need of interventions. Whether we choose to laugh or to cry, this point is clear. Achebe has left a whetstone. We must sharpen the blunt edges of our lives on that whetstone.

The whetstone is a figuration for the corpus of words which he has left behind. If Africa does re-examine itself in the light of Achebe's numerous testimonies, Nigeria cannot afford to be deaf and blind to those testimonies.

A keystone in his career has been his concern for Nigeria. We could write volumes on *Nigeria, Achebe and the Rest of Us*. He says: "Nigeria is a child, gifted, enormously talented, prodigiously endowed and incredibly wayward." Those are the words of the inimitable Achebe on his engagement with Nigeria. Days after I read those words in Achebe's *The Education of a British-Protected Child*, I wrote a poem which I entitled "Chinua Achebe's Country". The poem says Nigeria is a sick child.

Little did I know that *There Was a Country* was so close by; and that it would raise a lot of dust:

We see the tough rind of your love,
You love your dear country

As a man loves
A child

With Down Syndrome.
Clusters of frazzled cells

Trussed up on a trembling plain.
O to love such a child

Is to hang the nerves on rafters.

Nigeria has continued to try the patience and the faith of all us. Never mind that there are those who profit from the status quo and they could be quite glib about the merits of this dysfunctional space.

In their hearts, they know that the Achebes of this country are right on many counts about the need for a new direction. It is a pity that Achebe is now caught in the endless mess of Biafra. But it takes very little from his agony over Nigeria.

Sometimes you wish it dead,

And sometimes you boil
In the head until you

Poke at God the Poor Craftsman.
Chromosome-riot, broad skull

And blunt face. A short drape
Over a short-circuited mind.

You really love this child
With Down Syndrome.

A few months after this poem was published in my *Length of Eyes*, Achebe has once again stirred a debate on Nigeria. His book, *There Was a Country*, has swept all Nigerians in thrall. The significance of this book is beyond the craft and the gaps. The strong point of this book is that it holds a mirror on the borderlines within Nigeria. It reveals the culture of denial which frames the ethnic boxes in which Nigerians stew. Nearly 100 years after the bloody British violated aboriginal autonomies and “froze” ethnic

boundaries, the tide of blood and bitterness has continued to insist on the otherness of the disparate nations that Lugard trapped in the Nigerian *mélange*.

Of course, colonialism is the source of Nigeria. And we can keep throwing stones at the White Devil for such a poor work. But is there any salvation in aiming stones at the White Devil? I do not think so. I think we should know our history and know where the Abiku began to torment us. But we cannot continue to stand under the burden of this sick child. There are questions for all Nigerians. Granted that the British have left this albatross around our neck, what have we done with it in over 50 years?

What have we done with the sick child? The debate about Achebe's book has revealed that we are still where the British left us, and we are mostly to blame for our poor craft of statesmanship. Could we not have been brave enough to bury the child and move on? But how can a sane man bury a child that is not dead? Could we not have been brave enough to kill the child, kill ourselves too and end the misery? But are infanticide and suicide not downright cowardly? Could we not have been brave enough to cure the child and live happily? There are more options, I admit. Why are we stuck with indecision? Why do we celebrate prevarication? To postpone doomsday? Or to advertise our death-wish?

A number of Nigerians have pointed at the way forward. Wole Soyinka, for instance, has consistently called for a Sovereign National Conference. The idea is that all the nations which are caught in this British conundrum must seat to discuss the future. The proposal makes a lot of sense. But there are others who do not see the necessity for a Confab: they argue that the child is not deathly ill; they make light of the symptoms. We hear such denials mostly in the bedrooms of power from persons who are either pathological liars or outright fools. How can anyone make light of the drums of war which have remained loud since Gowon and Ojukwu rolled them out? How can anyone make light of the undying anger of Biafra? How can anyone make light of Boko Haram's rain of booms? How can anyone make light of the deceptive lull of guns in the Niger Delta? How can anyone make light of the combustible hearth of O'dua? How can anyone make light of Nigeria's inability to conduct a proper census? How can anyone make light of the skewed federalism we practice? How can anyone make light of the ethnic import of our political parties? How can anyone make light of our questionable elections? Rather than hide in our ethnic boxes, let us step out and breathe fresh air into this country. Achebe may not have put it in these words, but even in death he would not deny that all these were part of what he saw as "the trouble with Nigeria". The structure of Nigeria is the point that must be addressed. The issue of resource control is central to the problem of structure.

As we march towards the next election, let us all know that the strength of this country will be tested by a storm. Let us know that this country has another date with destiny. We owe it to ourselves and to Africa to prove that we can save the child. It is

before us this day to choose life or death, laughter or misery. Will things remain fallen and apart in Nigeria? Achebe would smile excitedly from his grave if we say no. The world is watching us.