

## Introduction

### Chinua Achebe: The Man and His Works

Art and inspiration are concepts that often occur in close proximity. The artist's authenticity is apparently by reference to the sources, to inspiration, which is why there seems to be something purely private and personal about art: at least in its origins. Its future, however, is in the public sphere; from the moment it is born – if it really is art – the most urgent question about it becomes its preserving, not for the sake of the artist, but for that of its public. The work of art endures as a public event and in some way becomes an act of that public, the self-expression of that public. The greater the work, the greater the public in question. The full meaning of the work is connected to this public, whether a small ethnic group or humanity itself. By reference to what public or publics do we estimate the work of Chinua Achebe?

The interest in the *preserving* of Achebe, which Heidegger teaches is the appropriate response to great art, is a good guide. That interest is worldwide. It is seen in the range and volume of criticism of his works; it is seen in the aspect of translation, his *Things Fall Apart* being the most translated of African literary works; it is seen in the demand for possession of copies of his works, *Things Fall Apart* having outsold the entirety of the rest of the works making up African Writers Series and appearing in many other imprints, like Everyman, and being anthologized, as in the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*. It is also a must-read in educational curriculums and institutions across the globe. Many are in

fact of the view that Chinua Achebe is the greatest of African literary artists.

*Things Fall Apart* (1958) is by no means, however, his only work or only masterpiece. There are also *Arrow of God* (1964) and *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987). Some would also count *A Man of the People* (1966) among his masterpieces. *Things Fall Apart's* fame, however, must have put the others in something of a shade. His other literary works include *No Longer at Ease* (1960), *Girls at War* (1970), and *Beware Soul Brother and Other Poems* (1971), as well as children's literature.

But there are Chinua Achebe scholars who think that listing the above as his 'literary works' to the exclusion of other works like *The Trouble with Nigeria* (1973) and *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra* (2012) is unhelpful. To some of these, Chinua Achebe himself is the object of interest and his writings, including *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (1975), *Hopes and Impediments* (1987), *Home and Exile* are so many signs to analyze and so many scattered references to piece together in order to try and plumb the man's soul. For these especially, the man is the public event, and the writings are his words destined for his community; the words are preserved and rehearsed so that they may not be lost on that community. These words, whether *literary* in the sense of what is preserved in the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, or analytical as in *The Trouble with Nigeria*, make up a secular scripture.

This approach to the writer and his works is inevitably reductionist, as it attempts to construct a system out of the diversity that makes up Achebe's oeuvre, all hanging together

upon a kernel word in his 'The Novelist as a Teacher', first enunciated in 1965, namely 'to espouse – to help my society regain belief in itself and put away the complex of the years of denigration and self-abasement' (*Hopes and Impediments*, 30). In focusing on the writer himself, this passage is what frequently serves as both the kerygma and the mission which the individual works carry forward, the support structure which sustains all the writing and gives a direction to the man's whole life, the key for the interpretation of all his works, and the pathway out of any ambiguities that might be encountered in them.

The translators and anthologizers of *Things Fall Apart* reflect a different attitude towards the above, in which the focus is on the individual work, not on the man. The intrinsic qualities of the works are examined; and it is these that in the eyes of the world confer greatness on the man, rather than the man's idea, that is vision, conferring greatness on the work. He is a world phenomenon because of these works – the 'literary' ones, particularly.

But even if it be affirmed that the 'literary' works belong to a special class, and that it is to these that is owed his international fame, there is still need to keep all the others in view in order to see the full dimensions of the man. Chinua Achebe is the African writer with the widest reach, in terms of the variety of intellectual phenomena he cultivated and had put his stamp on. Literary art is one area; but there are also criticism, cultural studies, and essay writing of a philosophical bent; as well as these, his writings extend into political thought, history, social ethics, and socio-cultural advocacy.

Chinua Achebe Memorial Lecture held by the Faculty of Arts, University of Nigeria, Nsukka in 2016 under the theme, 'In the service of the Arts: In the Service of Culture and Nation' provided a rare opportunity of an interface of some of the interests and pursuits that Chinua Achebe had espoused. But Achebe's fame has been growing steadily since 1958, the year of publication of his *Things Fall Apart*, for his work as a literary artist, and one of the masters in literary art in the twentieth century. Professor Nwachukwu-Agbada's paper, however, places the focus on the man himself, who is 'a writer of vision, more or less a seer, a writer with a prophetic responsibility'. Accordingly, in this paper, Achebe stands out as a gigantic figure, towering and overlooking his times and the circumstances of those times. His work and career are apparently governed by a standard which had been proclaimed in a 1965 article, 'The Role of the Writer in a New Nation', which was later issued in a collection with other articles in *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (1975). Nwachukwu-Agbada articulates and elucidates that governing idea as follows:

To restore the dignity of the African denigrated by colonialism and misrepresented in practically all fields of knowledge. Achebe's task then was to teach his African readers that "their past – with all its imperfections – was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them".

His familiar works, from *Things Fall Apart* to *Anthills of the Savannah* and *There Was a Country* come out in this scholar's paper as magisterial utterances addressing one or another of the issues of the times, attempting 'to elicit his

country's attention'. Nwachukwu-Agbada also holds the view that 'what we largely know about the Igbo either came from him or was instigated by what he said about them', except perhaps on the matter of Igbo religion.

In their ethno-cultural exploration of *Things Fall Apart*, Professor Pat Uche Okpoko and his team of researchers, Chinwe Okpoko and Afamefuna P. Eyisi, underscore that Umuofia of that novel is 'a fictitious Igbo community', and give prominence to the idea of *portrayal* of extra-textual existents: the lifestyles of the Igbo, their cultural practices and community-building strategies, their religious traditions and belief systems, their information communication methods, and their value and action orientations. To them, this novel is evidentiary of certain ethnographic facts, which presumably may be corroborated from other sources.

In her reaction to Professor Nwachukwu-Agbada's paper, Professor Esther Nkiruka Ugwu accepts the dividing of the career of Chinua Achebe into three phases, but organizes her paper in such a way as to address the themes of art, culture, and nation as Achebe's threefold preoccupations. She is, therefore, careful not to collapse these three interests into one.

Addressing the aspect of leadership in politics, Peter Gregory Obi (CON), who as Governor of Anambra State of Nigeria (2006-2014), was widely believed not only to have been a very successful and high-achieving public servant and office holder and the first in that State to have given the people a taste of good governance since inception in 1991, showed that Achebe's *The Trouble with Nigeria* had been a big source of inspiration. With its strong affirmation that leadership places one in a position to make a great difference

for good or ill in the lives of the people, leadership positions were clearly a test of the grain an individual was made of. Sound moral qualities were important in the personality of the leader, but only a starting point. The high standards set in *The Trouble with Nigeria* required that this morally sound individual should also have a clear sense of direction, seriousness of purpose, focus on service to the people, with strict fiscal discipline and zero tolerance to waste.

In his paper, Governor Peter Obi takes as a point of departure an event in the life of Chinua Achebe which he considers to bring out the man's moral character and a practical illustration of what the term 'leadership' so forcefully elaborated in *The Trouble with Nigeria* entails in real life. In 2004, Chinua Achebe had been nominated and his name published for the award of the national honour of Commander of the Federal Republic (CFR). He had turned down the honour because, as he put it,

for some time now I have watched events in Nigeria with alarm and dismay.... I have watched particularly the chaos in my own state of Anambra where a small clique of renegades, openly boasting its connections in high places, seems determined to turn my homeland into a bankrupt and lawless fiefdom. I am appalled by the brazenness of this clique and the silence, if not connivance, of the Presidency.

This angry rejection of the offer of a national award from the Federal Government is seen by Peter Obi not just as a historical fact or a knee-jerk reaction in the face of a clique of renegades claiming all kinds of privileges and immunities, taking, as in one of his books, too much for the owner not to

know. To Mr Obi, this incident is rich in political symbolism. It signifies for him Achebe's refusal to go along and both maintain his calm and dignity and avoid ruffling feathers, as many others probably would have done; a refusal to settle for what one may get legitimately or even rightfully from a corrupt system, so long as one is personally uncontaminated – a refusal, therefore, to use sophistry to justify what one is getting for oneself as good in itself, and not to be confused with the unworthy moral environment it may be coming out of; a refusal to look the other way, when things were going wrong; a refusal to be part of the mess being made of things; a refusal to acquiesce by silence. Achebe himself has commented on the symbolism of this act, as in a quote in Professor Nkiruka Ugwu's reaction, that "one of the truest tests of integrity is its blunt refusal to be compromised". The incident re-echoes in all its complex political symbolism throughout the lecture as Mr Peter Obi revisits the institutions, time-sanctioned practices, prestige projects and expensive acquisitions which were treated as part of the normal costs of 'governance', but which gulped up money sorely needed for effective government, and his having to stop the wastage at every point, saving the state hundreds of millions, which went into providing basic needs of the people. The stance taken by Achebe in the face of the offer of the high recognition of Commander of the Federal Republic (CFR) is what the Governor highlights as the guiding principle in his tenure as the Chief Executive of Anambra State and urges should be everybody's rule of life in public service. In his view, Achebe provides a precept for political responsibility in *The Trouble with Nigeria* and to some extent

also in *There was a Country*, and in his reaction to his name appearing in the national honours list for 2004 has shown what it means in concrete terms to have high moral purpose.

All the participants in this colloquium agree that Achebe's deserves to be given special honours by the Nigeria state – not necessarily by the award of Commander of the Federal Republic, which is a high honour indeed, but also in other more permanent ways. Professor Nwachukwu-Agbada calls for the erection of an Umuofia village 'which will harbour much of the relics of the Igbo past as a tourist attraction'; Professor Ugwu demands the memorializing of the great writer; for example by erection of statue in public and prominent places 'to inspire people to want to know more about [him]'. She goes on that in addition to the Biennial Memorial Lecture at the University of Nigeria,

It would be an amazing and astounding gesture to show visitors where Achebe lived and worked on campus. A statue of Achebe should be erected on campus and in the state capital. We do not have many of such people in a generation. The house he lived in and the office he used are top destinations people all over the world would like to come and see.

The preserving and institutionalizing of the rich and varied legacy of Chinua Achebe is obviously beyond the capacity of a single university faculty. Professor Nwachukwu-Agbada's expression of concern in his lecture about forgetfulness, even willful forgetfulness of those who have moved on is wrapped in wry humour. But the point is that in the case of Chinua Achebe, the memory is critically important for Achebe's many publics now and in the future, beginning with the



Nigerian and African publics; the point is that the institutionalizing and the preserving of the legacy is something these publics will do – must do – for themselves.

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