Literature and Global Peace Initiatives in the 21st Century: Achebe's Search for Genuine Reconciliation and Peace in *There Was A Country*

Dr. Sylvanus Onyeachulam
Department of English Language & Literature
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
sc.onyeachulam@unizik.edu.ng.
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7727-9308
&
Comfort Goma Mbanugo
Department of English Language and Literature
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
cg.mbanugo@unizik.edu.ng

Abstract

Literature has long served as a medium through which writers reflect and interrogate the social, political, and economic realities of their societies. Through characterization, language, and thematic exploration, literary artists communicate important messages about human experiences and societal challenges. This study examines the role of literature in promoting peace and reconciliation, adopting a qualitative research design with real focus on textual analysis with particular reference to Chinua Achebe's *There Was a Country*. The paper explores how Achebe employs his memoir of the Nigerian Civil War to highlight the devastating consequences of war, ethnic division, and political marginalization. The study adopts the Cosmopolitan Theory propounded by Diogenes the Cynic, Immanuel kant among others. Drawing on the concept of global peace initiatives, which advocate human development, social justice, and peaceful coexistence, the study argues that Achebe's work serves as a powerful call for national healing and genuine reconciliation. The memoir exposes the suffering endured by the Igbo as a people during and after the war while emphasizing the need for equity, inclusion, and lasting

peace in a multicultural society. The paper concludes that *There Was a Country* transcends historical documentation to become a significant literary intervention that promotes peace-building and challenges the persistent marginalization of affected communities in post-war Nigeria.

Keywords: War, Peace, Reconciliation, Marginalization, Ethnicity, Global Peace Initiatives.

Introduction

The works of most contemporary African writers explore the confusion, catastrophes and wrangling that arose from power mongering, ethnic sentiments and parochial inclinations of the people after independence. These writers' works are reflections of the African societies immediately the white man granted them self- government. Since the colonial contact, modern African writers have made great efforts to portray their experiences, interactions, worldviews and the consequences of the interpersonal relationships, borrowing heavily from their cultures. Hence, M.A. Ezugu in *Fundamentals of English Language and Literature* says that "Literature is a replica of the world we live in. It reflects a world filled with fantasy, horror, and emotions, as well as various points of view, ideas, and thoughts expressed in words." (132)

He further says that "literature is experience of permanent interests inherited in memorable form" (182). Thus, literature portrays the lives, traditions, language, myth and psychology that govern the people's values and norms or attitudes in any given era. As Chinyere Nwahunanya says in *A Harvest from Tragedy: Critical Perspectives on Nigerian Civil War Literature:*

> In every age, literature has always mirrored the society; and writers have invariably shown concern for the convolutions that beset their societies. In a world where selfish national interests, racism, the struggle for power, and a myriad of other factors keep human relationships in a state of perpetual tension, this tension has often found outlet in political turbulence of national or international dimensions. The American Civil War, the World Wars, the Spanish Civil War, the Vietnam War, and the Nigerian Civil War are just few examples of the imbroglios that have resulted from the conflicts between man and institutions in a strife-tom world (55).

In each of the above cases, writers in the countries involved in war have used the conflicts as a source of materials for creative literature. The experience is not confined to fiction. The First World War, for instance, produced poets among whom Rupert Brooke and Stephen Spender immediately come to mind. Wilfred Owen emerged as a major voice during Second World War before he lost his life. The Spanish Civil War saw the emergence of such poets as John Conford, Julian Bell, Ralph Fox, and the famous Garcia Lorca, all of whom were killed during that war. For the novel, we have Ernest Hemmingway's strident voice in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, and the five hundred and twelve novels produced by the American Civil War, point to how fertile wars can be as material for creative literature.

The Nigerian Civil War of 1967-70 now resides in the minds of its survivors. But, like other wars in history, it echoes stridently in the pages of numerous books-fiction and non-fiction, plays and poetry of varying artistic merit--confirming Kole Omotoso's view at the time that the Nigerian Civil War is the most important theme in post-war Nigerian writing. Part of the explanation for the dominance of war as a subject in certain literature for many years after the end of the war

may be found in Lucien Goldmann's observation that "periods of crisis … are particularly favourable to the birth of great works of art and of literature because of the multiplicity of problems and experiences that they bring to men and of the great widening of affective and intellectual horizons that they provoke'" (50). In addition, writers dwell on wars now because of what Ogunyemi calls "the sheer urge to record, as truthfully as possible, an excruciating indelible, visceral experience which the author has been physically and/or emotionally involved in' (126).

The events of the Civil War period in Nigeria were traumatic experiences that threatened the very existence of people as individuals, and of a people as a corporate entity. Therefore, the urge to take a retrospective glance at those events has just been too strong to be resisted by our writers. Just as Nigerian writers responded to immediate post-independence political crises, so also did they see a need for responding to the civil war which was the culmination of those crises. It is therefore no surprise that the war became so dominant as a theme in Nigerian post-war writers and remained so for a long time.

The war memoirs in particular are interesting for their sometimes triumphant, exculpatory or condemnatory tone. This is true in particular of the authors' accounts of their roles in the war, and their portraits of the Biafran leader, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu. While projecting themselves as people drawn unwillingly into a war they advised against, and as people who either suffered unjustly (for ethnic or other reasons) while giving their best selflessly to the nation, they project Ojukwu as a stubborn leader who led his people to an avoidable disaster because of pride, selfishness and a recalcitrant intransigence. They also project him as an unrepentant, untactful and undiplomatic leader who could not discern good from

bad advice, qualities which were cashed in by replay of all the evils that bedeviled Nigerian pre-war activities and, consequently, helped the noble ideals of the revolution.

As Remy Oriaku in *Political Memoirs of the Nigerian Civil War* says, 'the most obvious common feature of the Nigerian Civil War memoirs is their authors intentions' (29). They have presented not their inward perceptions of events, as the straight autobiographer would do; rather, they have each recounted external details from a personal, usually biased, perspective. The bias is often obscured by the author's interpretative presentation of his experiences which create for each text its own relative truth. The author's declared intention which is invariably prompted by modesty is usually different from that discerned by the reader at the end of the story.

Thus, modern African fiction arose after the psychic trauma of slavery and colonialism, which made her literature in the twentieth century one with a running sore, a stigmata that forced her literature to dissipate its energies in a dogged fight to re-establish the African personality. The lachrymal nature of modern African literature made it inevitable for that literature to start by blaming the white man for everything wrong with, castigating him for exporting our resources and debasing our humanity. We also blamed the white man for not granting us an independence flag to allow us develop ourselves. And when the white man threw in the towel, our eyes were opened to the rapacity, greed, myopic and the corrupt tendencies of our indigenous politicians, which made military interventions inevitable and subsequent wars among the various ethnic nationalities; hence the need for reconciliation and peaceful coexistence.

The Cosmopolitan Theory

The **Cosmopolitan Theory** is the idea that all human beings belong to one shared moral community, regardless of their nationality, ethnicity, religion, language, or culture. The term **"cosmopolitan"** comes from the Greek words *kosmos* (world) and *polites* (citizen), meaning **"citizen of the world."** The theory promotes the belief that people have moral obligations not only to their own communities but also to humanity as a whole. The roots of cosmopolitan theory can be traced to the ancient Greek philosopher Diogenes of Sinope, who famously declared, "I am a citizen of the world." Later, the Stoic philosophers expanded the idea by arguing that every individual is part of a universal human community. In the eighteenth century, Immanuel Kant developed the concept further in his work on perpetual peace, arguing that nations should cooperate under universal principles of justice and human rights. Other proponents of this theory include Kwame Anthony Appiah and Martha Nussbaum. Cosmopolitan theory is a philosophical and social perspective that emphasizes universal human dignity, equal moral worth of all individuals, respect for cultural diversity, global cooperation and responsibility, and the reduction of barriers created by national boundaries. According to this theory, people should see themselves as members of both their local communities and the wider global society.

The theory applies to this topic across three distinct dimensions:

1. **Literature as "Moral Cosmopolitanism": Giving Pain a Global Address**

Moral cosmopolitanism argues that all human suffering matters equally, regardless of geography or nationality. However, global politics often treats distant tragedies as mere statistics. This is where literature steps in as a peace mechanism. In ***There Was a Country,***

Achebe blends historical prose with haunting poetry to humanize the victims of the Biafran war, particularly the children who died of starvation caused by the blockade. By doing this, Achebe elevates a historical Nigerian conflict into a universal warning about the horrors of war. Achebe also targets a global conscience. He notes that the Biafran war was one of the first to be televised globally, shocking international onlookers. By writing this book for a 21st-century global audience, he uses literature to cultivate what cosmopolitan theorists call global empathy—forcing readers worldwide to recognize that the violation of human rights in one corner of the world is a scar on humanity as a whole.

2. **Critiquing the Anti-Cosmopolitan State: The Failure of the Nation-State**

Political cosmopolitanism argues that the traditional nation-state model is deeply flawed when it prioritizes state sovereignty over the human rights of its individuals. Achebe's book is a masterclass in this exact critique. Achebe traces the root of Nigeria's collapse back to the 1914 Amalgamation by British colonialists, famously writing that Britain handed over Nigeria "like a piece of chocolate cake at a birthday party," forcing 250 distinct ethnic groups into one artificial boundary without their consent. When the 1966 anti-Igbo pogroms broke out, the state failed to protect its citizens. Achebe argues that Biafra's secession wasn't born out of aggressive nationalism, but out of a desperate need for survival when the nation-state model turned violent against its own people. Through a cosmopolitan lens, the book demonstrates that when a state fails to uphold the universal moral right to life, its sovereignty loses legitimacy.

3."Rooted Cosmopolitanism" as the Path to Genuine Reconciliation

The most direct intersection between the theory and Achebe's text lies in philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah's concept of "rooted cosmopolitanism." This is the idea that a person can be deeply proud of their local culture, being Igbo or Nigerian while simultaneously being a citizen of the world who seeks universal peace. Achebe refuses to abandon either identity. He writes lovingly about his Igbo heritage, his pride in early post-independence Nigeria, and his belief in universal human values. He also argues that post-war Nigeria's official slogan—"No Victor, No Vanquished"—was a false, superficial peace because the government swept the massacres and economic marginalization of the Igbos under the rug. For Achebe, genuine reconciliation requires truth-telling. A rooted cosmopolitan peace initiative does not ask people to forget their ethnic traumas to achieve "national unity"; instead, it demands that the nation acknowledge local suffering through a universal standard of justice and human dignity.

While ***There was a Country*** is rooted in the specific historical trauma of the Biafran war, Achebe used the power of 21st century Literature to transform a localized conflict into a universal cosmopolitan appeal. He argues that genuine global peace cannot be achieved by silencing marginalized identities or hiding behind state borders, but by holding state accountable to universal human rights, practicing radical historical truth telling and fostering global empathy. .

Search for Genuine Reconciliation and Peace in *There Was A Country*

Chinua Achebe's *There Was a Country* is a versatile book that is encompassing. It passes for a history, autobiography, biography,

poetry, essay, criticism, etc. and its importance to the world, especially to the Igbos, cannot be over buttressed. Achebe painstakingly engages in a flashback on Nigerian history to reveal the hidden things in the country. It is sufficient to state that the book is a goodbye to the present generation and beyond.

The controversial *There Was a Country* has four parts and the work can be better analyzed as such. In part one, Achebe tries to narrate to us his background, both personal and parental. He talks about his father Isaiah Achebe who was raised by his maternal uncle Udoh. He also mentions how his father, Isaiah, was converted and became an evangelist in the Anglican Mission around 1904. Then his mother, Janet Anaenechi who also attained the primary school level which in their days was a feat for the women folk. Thus, Achebe shows how, along with his five siblings, grew up to love education.

In this early part of the novel, he also contrasts and compares the two dominant religions of Eastern Nigerian, Christianity and the traditional religion. This is very evident in the relationship of Achebe's father (Isaiah) and his uncle (Udoh Osinya). This association highlights Achebe's gratitude for the white man's learning while at the same time treasuring his traditional heritage. As Achebe says in the novel,

> "I have also learned a little more skepticism about them (white man) than my father had any need for. Does it matter, I ask myself, that centuries before pen Christians sailed down to us in ships to deliver the Gospel and save us from darkness, other European Christians, also sailing in ships, delivered us to the transatlantic slave trade and unleashed darkness in our world." (14)

Achebe humorously continued this conflict between the new and the old by showing the futility and foolishness of abandoning the old irrationally all in the name of being trendy when he tells about an experience in his school days. A mad man comes into the class when they were having Geography lesson and wipes the board clean and substitutes the foreign topic with the lesson about their local habitat. In Achebe's words:

> "Looking back, it is instructive in my estimation, that it was a so-called mad- man whose clarity of perspective is questionable identified the incongruity of our situation that the pupils would benefit not only from a colonial education but also by instruction about their own history and civilization" (15).

Achebe's *There Was a Country* would comfortably pass for a history book for it mentions men and women of repute who lived during his time, some of whom are still alive today. These ones include: Mike Momah, Dr Francis Egbuonu, Christopher Okigbo, Vincent Chukwuemeka Ike, Elechi Amadi, I.N.C. Aniebo, Ken Saro Wiwa, etc., talented young men and women seen as the pioneers of modern African literature. In the writings of these people one would also encounter themes of war and its repercussions as they all saw and lived through the Nigerian-Biafran war, the standpoint of Achebe's narrative.

The first part of the book concludes with the introduction to the theme of war hints on the genesis of the Nigerian political turmoil. Starting with his marginalization by British publishers when he tried placing the manuscript, ***Things Fall Apart*** (an earlier work by the same author), he brings up the masterminds of Nigerian independence, people like Nnamdi Azikiwe, Ojukwu Odumegwu, Louis Mbanefo and how the colonial masters tried to truncate the

movement. Failing in their efforts to stop the independence, they now, using Sir Robertson as a tool, rubbished true self-rule by carrying out the first election rigging in the country when they planted their stooge from the North so that he could always do their bidding. It was this situation that made Achebe writes *A Man of the People* while Soyinka came up with *Before Blackout*.

Having sown the seed of discord among the Nigerian people, as a nation, the country seems to be playing out the theme of Achebe's first work, *Things Fall Apart*. Not long after the independence was pronounced in 1960, the Nzeogwu coup took the stage with its effects on the Nigerian nation and the collaborative ill treatment meted out to the Igbo race by both the British and the Northerners. This ill treatment was as a result of the belief that the coup was masterminded by the Igbos and they became vindictive. This coup was closely followed by the counter-coup of which the then leaders Aguiyi Ironsi and Fajuyi were eliminated, both being killed by Northerners led by Murtala Muhammed and the pogrom of the easterners, particularly the Igbos (63). This incident marked out Achebe's other work *A Man of the People* as prophetic as the book talked about military coup and the overthrow of a corrupt civilian government.

Achebe, tracing the roots of this imbroglio, tells us that the serial killings of the Igbos both in the North and in Lagos, the then capital city of Nigeria, were occasioned by a failing leadership of the post-independence era. This first part concludes with Achebe telling us that the decision to secede was not just by Colonel Ojukwu but that he was mandated by other elite sons of the lgbo land, including Nnamdi Azikiwe, Dr Michael I Okpara, Sir Francis Ibiam, Sir Louis Mbanefo, Dr Alvan Ikoku, Mr K.0. Mbadiwe, Mr N. U. Akpan, Mr Joseph Echeruo, Ekukinam- Bassey, Samuel Mbakwe, Jerome Udoii. Chief Margaret Ekpo, etc. The author ends this part with Ojukwu

declaring a full blown war on May 30, 1967 with the full backing of the Eastern House Constituent Assembly.

Achebe in Part Two gave reasons for the secession of Biafra and mentioned the countries that gave their support. Before the full-scale war, Achebe tells us that there were series of meetings that culminated to Lieutenant Colonel Yakubu Gowon who led the Federal Government to call for peace talks in order to find a solution to the problem. This meeting was held at Aburi in Ghana, where it was agreed that the Igbos be allowed to go ahead and secede. The aftermath of the accord was the advice of Obafemi Awolowo to the Federal Government that if the Igbos are left to go, the other ethnic groups will toe the same line and the country would disintegrate. And so Gowon was no more committed to carry out the terms of the accord.

The position of Biafra then was that the Igbos and the easterners were deliberately being killed by the northerners and the Federal Government was not doing anything about it. The position of the Federal Government was that to allow the Igbos and other easterners to go would amount to division and the split of the country and that was unacceptable. The organization of African Unity (0AU) failed to perform its duty as a body. In May 1968, the meeting was scheduled for Kampala, the Uganda which ended up being a "fiasco of confusion," It was rescheduled 28 yet another failure, being known as "sliding door"

Achebe tells us that other nations that would have helped the situation did little or nothing out of selfish interests. For Britain, the former colonizer of Nigeria, they would not let it disintegrate as it would amount to a game of shame to them. France and United States were only interested in the oil and are only interested in supporting

whatever faction from which they hoped to gain the most benefit: "It was alleged that Washington under the President Lyndon Johnson, before he left office in January 1968, was aiding the Nigerian war effort in cooperation with the British" (103).

Also, in this Second Part, Achebe narrates what happened during the war in phases--the brutal killings, destruction of houses and even his press office, the popular Abagana ambush, the hard times people suffered, the embarrassment, the transmission of the war episode and how they survived, notwithstanding the painful death of Christopher Okigbo. The intellectuals became disillusioned as the young nation was dividing into two. Many intellectuals became "public intellectuals," many played very active roles, such as Cyprian Ekwensi who was one of the "pioneers of the West African literary renaissance of the twentieth century."

Achebe, as a war historian, tells that the Biafran military led by Victor Banjo advanced to River Niger and conquered from Asaba to Benin and declared the republic of Benin in 1967. The arrangement was that Ojukwu had agreed with Obasanjo to allow the Biafran army to advance to Lagos state unhindered but Victor Banjo reached Benin and refused to proceed. This action gave Gowon chance to regroup and send Colonel Murtala Muhammed with a division and Colonel Ibrahim Haruna to take over Benin and humiliate the Biafran army. In 1968, the Nigerian army overtook Calabar and killed all the Igbos there, about 1,000 to 2,000 people, mostly civilians.

The Ahiara Declaration was a written document published in 1969 by the Biafran intellectuals through which they expressed how the Biafran state would look, the type of education, why the secession and why the Biafrans fought as to what Nigerian government did to them. The Biafran Republic was against the genocide, racism and

imperialism and ethnic hatred (148). The Biafran headquarters and capital city situate at Enugu but when it fell to the Nigerians, the seat was shifted to Owerrl, Which remained the seat of government until the end of the war, as Achebe tells us.

Part three takes us deep into the war, a time when in Kwale at the capture of an oil rig ten Italians and a Jordan who have been helping the Nigerian soldiers to destabilize the Biafran system were killed. Also, the Biafrans captured eighteen white men wh0 were aiding the Northerners--fourteen Italians, three Germans and one Lebanese. This development stirred the international community and there were calls for their release from all quarters. The Vatican, Germany, Portugal, Ivory Coast and Gabon were all pleading for them. This made Ojukwu to say:

For eighteen white men, Europe is aroused. What have they said about our millions? Eighteen white men assisting in the crime of genocide. What do they say about our murdered innocents? How many black dead make one missing white? Mathematicians, please answer me. Is it infinity? (219).

Achebe now discusses the loss of property and human dignity as consequences of the war. The lives of Biafrans became very awful as a result of hunger, thirst, suffering and destitution, and the attempt to look for food exposed people to federal oops and they suffer the horrors of rape and other war crimes (173), It is here that he the casualties of the dreaded kwashiorkor which took the lives of many Biafran children. Yet, the Biafran army was resolute and would not give up. At Abagana, Major Jonathan concocted an elaborate plan with which he contained the battalions of Colonel Shuwa and Murtal & Muhammed who joined forces to unleash mayhem on the Biafrans.

In this part, Achebe discussed the end of the war, after Gowon's troops recaptured Owere and how Biafra fell and Ojukwu's taking up asylum in Ivory Coast. When Sir Louis Mbanefo and Philip Effiong along with others surrendered their weapons at Dodan Barracks to Gowon, Gowon made the national broadcast of the Stoppage of the war, with the popular maxim, "No victor no vanquished."

What followed showed how hypocritical that declaration seems to be. Achebe tells us that even after the war, the Igbo were still dealt with in a bad manner by approving only twenty pounds for each Igbo depositor of the Nigerian currency in the bank, regardless of the amount he had. Achebe sees this as a measure put in place to stunt or even obliterate the economy of the Igbo race.

The Nigerian government also banned the importation of second hand clothing and stock fish, which were the Igbo man's trade for survival. These are all government's strategy to stunt the progress and upliftment of the Igbo.

In part four, Achebe talks about the aftermath of the war. He shows a society much worse than when it was in the hands of the colonial masters. Now, he says, it is filled with mediocrity, moral decadence, ineptitude, indiscipline, ethnic bigotry, etc, as can be seen among the ruling class. The author laments the crime rate in the country, even where the presidency aids and abates crime and for selfish reasons. He affirms that the crime rate in the country has passed the alarming stage but entered the fatal stage due to bad leadership. Achebe states clearly how woefully Nigerian state and leadership has failed because it failed to protect its citizens from killings and attacks from terrorists and religious sects. He claims that even some of the leaders are part of the problem. In a reconciliatory tone, Achebe ends his narrative by

highlighting what true leadership should be, one that would have saved the Nigerian-Biafran war. He points out leaders like Nelson Mandela, who made sacrifices for the cohesion of their people as examples worthy of imitation by Nigerian leaders. The war had introduced nepotism, tribalism, racism, corruption of the highest order, embezzlement, bootlicking, and other evils into the Nigerian polity, a situation the country is still battling with, for which Achebe had rejected national honours awarded him by the ruling elites (255).

The author ends with a fitting poem, "After a War," in which he shows how Biafrans after the war began to pack their broken pieces of live together to forge ahead, though not without toughness, because no matter how they tried to be happy, it is the half-hazard way because they lost so much before, during and immediately after the war. Since no palm nut will go into the pounding mortar without being scratched, what they experienced can never be forgotten in a jiffy. The tail end of the novel advocates true reconciliation through the integration of the Igbos into national affairs, removal of marginalisation and even distribution of national resources/wealth.

Conclusion

In his quest for genuine reconciliation and peaceful coexistence, Achebe points his torchlight on the roots of the bad blood among the Nigerian peoples, which entrenches ethnic conflicts and squabbles, In *There Was a Country*, he goes back to the late colonial days when the movement for independence was going on and showed how the process was corrupted by the imposing of a less preferred candidate through rigging of the first elections in Nigeria. The book then shows how this precipitated into discontent among the people, igniting the

polity into action and the subsequent full-scale War that ensured. During the war, it became an avenue for a number of atrocities and gave room for the exhibition of certain human vices which made it difficult for the leaders to have prevented the war. Achebe also shows that even after the war, despite the declaration of "no victor no vanquished," the nation is yet to see the maxim lived.

Indeed, the vision of this author has turned to a mission almost accomplished, having created adequate awareness of these problems in Nigeria. He, therefore, calls on every Nigerian, to rise above the divisive elements and work for genuine reconciliations.

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