

**MEMOIR AS SWAN SONG: ECHOES OF NOSTALGIA,  
DISILLUSIONMENT AND VALEDICTION IN CHINUA  
ACHEBE'S *THERE WAS A COUNTRY***

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For Chinua Achebe, recognizing that his end was near, the writing of *There was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra*, documenting each step of the way, what happened and who did what, was therefore, the last attempt to tell Nigeria, both as a country and a people where the rain began to beat us, in the hope that someone would listen, wake up and turn the country in the right direction.

- Umelo Ojinmah

**Introduction**

No book in recent Nigeria's history has generated as much comments and remarks both the scathingly acerbic and the bombastically combative like Chinua Achebe's last book *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra* which was released in the last quarter of 2012. Apart from the controversy that greeted the book, that Achebe joined his revered ancestors almost five months after the publication of the book behooves a remarkably significant impetus on the book. The book undoubtedly but expressly becomes Achebe's swan song for according to a Voice of America Special English Publication, *Words and their Stories*, the expression swan song which originated long ago, and has even a Greek interpretation is currently used to mean 'the last work of a poet, musician or writer... the final effort of any person [or] usually considered that person's finest work' (155). In this essay, we will

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concentrate on the first two attributes, that is, we will look at Achebe's last published work as well as his final documented comments on Nigeria. As for his finest work, *Things Fall Apart* unarguably remains an all-time classic.

Acknowledging the memoir slant of the work and bearing all the above in mind, this essay would not in any way join issues with any of the camps that have mushroomed into existence since the publication of *There Was a Country*. It aims not at escalating some raging controversies or taking sides with any of the polemical grounds by supporting or parodying any of the entrenched viewpoints. Rather, the essay will subject the book to some critical analysis so as to ascertain how the literary medium of memoir has offered Achebe the opportunity to reflect on his life, the life of his people, the Igbo, and that of his country, Nigeria. Efforts will be made to stick steadfastly to the possibility of carefully distilling the textual essence of the book without getting in the out-and-out personality centred arguments which the book has attracted. The discussion will aim at sifting some critically enriching materials from the book and juxtaposing them with some of the comments and observations which have trailed the book since its publication. With this, we will assess, to what extent the book serves as a worthy medium through which Achebe looks back at his life and meditates on the goings-on in his country especially at the twilight of his life.

### **On Memoir, Comments, Reviews and Observations**

The memoir is a seminal offshoot of the literary creation called autobiography. Quoting Holman and Herman, Mcluckie explains the underlying difference between a memoir and an autobiography this way.

[A memoir is] a form of autobiographical writing dealing usually with the recollections of one who has been a part of or has witnessed significant events. Memoirs differ from

autobiography proper in that they are usually concerned with personalities and actions other than those of the writer, whereas autobiography stresses the inner and private life of its subjects (14).

I have noted elsewhere that while the 'autobiography gives a chronological account of the author from the cradle to even near the grave, in memoir, the author takes a snapshot at his life and comments on a particular period, event or occasion which he deems spectacular' and that it 'is written to correct an impression or to state one's side of a case, to reveal some facts about a dicey issue or to explain or vindicate one's role in a moment, saga or an epoch' (4). In this instance, we will obviously take *There Was a Country* as a snapshot of Achebe's life, reflecting some outstanding episodes in his life particularly his early childhood and adulthood as well as the 'dicey' Biafran war which the author not only experienced but was one of the key active non-gun-totting combatants. Isidore Diala sees the memoir as 'an individual's record of their perception of momentous public events, subjective, biased, represents an invaluable interrogation and complement to official chronicles, even while remaining a *literary event*' (112). He further highlights that 'in the memoir, it is the communal narrative rather than the private that is pivotal' (112). Going by Diala's postulation, it will be unrealistic to expect unalloyed objectivity in memoirs which according to him carry more of the pulse and aspirations of a people more than that of the author. This is premised on the fact that for one to qualify as a memoirist the person must have attained a commanding height in the public domain; must be a statesman/woman or must have done some ordinary things extraordinarily or taken part in a spectacular event. Laying credence to this, Remy Oriaku points out that 'a memoir narrates events happening around an author and situations in which he is involved, but these are strictly speaking not personal to him' (36). Similarly,

those who are charging Achebe of impartial presentation and narration of events in *There Was a Country* seem to be unfamiliar with the principles of memoir as further highlighted by Oriaku. 'Unlike the writer of history proper, the memoirist is not noted for his objectivity. His selection, interpretation and presentation of events from his life are conditioned by his temperament; his relations with other people in his life and especially his purpose of writing' (37). Having highlighted these basic issues of a memoir, we shall evaluate how far Achebe in *There was a Country* subscribes to them as well as the extent to which he departs or sustains them. But before that, it will be expedient to review some comments and observations which have heralded the appearance of the book.

Among the most damningly acerbic remarks about *There Was A Country* is that of Damilola Awoyokun who devoted ample time to write an article he serialized in *The News* magazine with the title 'America's Secret Files: The Biafra Story.' Generating a boatload of information on the Biafran war based on information he sourced from American secret files on the war which have been de-classified, he avers that 'placed side by side independent accounts of the Nigerian Civil War, Professor Chinua Achebe's *There Was a Country* is a pot-pourri of deliberate misrepresentations, outright inventions and a one-eyed view of events' (14). As if that is not enough, he concluded his long article thus; 'Mandela described Achebe as the writer 'in whose company the prison walls fell down', with *There Was a Country*, Achebe is the writer in whose company dangerous walls are rising up: walls of tribal hatred, walls of lies, walls of sloppy thinking and lazy research, walls of propaganda and walls of moral ineptitude' (28). This virulent parody is mildly tempered when compared with the outright vituperations of some ethno-jingoistic watchdogs of tribal personages, who like the writer above, glossed over the piercingly heart-touching issues raised in the book but concentrated on personages who allusions are made

to in the book. Proclaiming himself as a historian, one of them, Femi Fani-Kayode in reviewing the book pontificates on how he thinks history should be discussed. 'I have always believed that if we must talk history, we must be dispassionate, objective and factual. We must take emotions out of it and we must always tell the truth' (1). Acknowledging that the Igbos before the Biafran war faced a pogrom, 'I am also an admirer of Colonel Emeka Odumegwu Ojukwu who stood up for his people when it mattered the most and when they were being slaughtered by rampaging mobs in the northern part of our country. At least 100,000 Igbos were killed in those northern pogroms which took place before the war...' (1) and about starvation during the war, 'I do not deny the fact that hundreds of thousands were starved to death as a consequence of the blockade that was imposed on Biafra by the Nigeria Federal Government. To deny that this actually happened would be a lie. It is a historical fact. Again I do not deny the fact that Awolowo publicly defended the blockade and indeed told the world that it was perfectly legitimate for any government to impose such a blockade on their enemies in times of war' (2). Despite these marked acquiescence, one then wonders how Fani-Kayode expects a dispassionate narration or recollection from Achebe who was directly involved and affected in the two sordid human catastrophes which he (Fani-Kayode) has acknowledged. As the Igbo would say: when another person's corpse is being carried, it looks like a bundle of faggots! Were he to be Achebe who lost some relatives in both the pogrom and the blockade-caused starvation during the war, would Fani-Kayode narrate them gleefully without passion? The same historical purview is pursued by Abdulrazaq O. Hamzat who equally magisterially warns that 'history is not like a movie that has a beginning and ending...The event of history, especially the account of war, cannot be narrated with emotions, attachment of feelings, if it's done, it may raise the dead souls, reverse the time

and repeat itself' (2). This view is countered by Chimamanda Adichie who disagrees with those who navigate towards that historical posture in their appraisal of *There Was a Country*. Writing in a tribute entitled 'Chinua Achebe at 82: 'We Remember Differently'' to mark Achebe's 82nd birthday anniversary, she reasons that Achebe 'escaped death a few times [during the war]. His best friend died in battle. To expect a dispassionate account from him is a remarkable failure of empathy' (2).

Like Fani-Kayode, Ebenezer Babatope does not hide his reason for reacting to the book as he sharply observes, 'it is painful, very painful that I have to cross swords again with Professor Achebe over his pronouncements and writing on the sage Papa Obafemi Awolowo'(1). As an ardent gate-keeper of the personality and persona of Pa Awolowo, his interests are utterly deflected from the central message of the book but are centripetally agglutinating towards a mere allusion to his god-like 'sage' whose role in the Civil War is somehow 'sacred' and perhaps should not even be discussed. 'Facts of history are sacred and it is heresy for anyone to attempt ever distorting such historical facts' (4) he vehemently opined. Ken Wiwa, son of the late military-slain environmentalist, Kenule SaroWiwa has a different opinion. To him Achebe in writing the book relieves himself of an enormous burden which he has borne for over forty years; he equally offers a different view of the Civil War discussion, 'Achebe was himself personal witness to the suffering of his people as he movingly recalls in this account... Achebe had not stirred up wounds that the passage of time has yet to fully heal. But as a national figure who played a prominent role as a Biafran ambassador, confidant to the charismatic Igbo leader General Ojukwu, Achebe's story needed to be told. His perspective is an important addition to what remains an unsettling but incomplete chapter in Nigeria's history' (2). He further recognizes Achebe's perspective by saying that '*There Was a Country* is a lion's

story of the Nigerian Civil War, a provocative memoir from the victim's point of view...' (1). For Femke Van Zeijl, the book is three in one; 'It took Achebe 42 years to publish this book and it is like he tried to cram all bottled up thoughts and emotions about Biafra into this one work. I have come to see *There Was a Country* as three books in one: a personal memoir, a political pamphlet and a history of war' (1) Ikeogu Oke in his counter-comment to Babatope's serialized review of the book sums his position quite philosophically. 'The Igbo say if you pluck a tick from a dog's body you should show it to the dog, so it does not think that you pinched it. That is what Achebe has done with *There Was a Country*, Nigeria's ultimate tick-dislodging book' (3).

Other views abound. According to Maxim Uzoatu, who sees the book as 'an encapsulation of the great man's [Achebe's] lifework' (2), Nadine Gordimer has this to say about the book. 'Chinua Achebe's history of Biafra is a meditation on the condition of freedom. It has tense narrative grip of the best fiction. It is also a revelatory entry into the intimate character of the writer's brilliant mind and bold spirit. Achebe has created here a new genre of literature in which politico-historical evidence, the power of storytelling, and revelations from the depths of the human subconscious are one...' (2). Gordimer is not the only one who sees a new trend in the book, Ike Anya tilts towards that axis when he affirms that 'The format he [Achebe] adopts is novel—involving a rambling mix of anecdotes, summarized histories, analysis, reportage, declamation and haunting poetry' (2). Chidi Nwaonu equally shares such opinion when he asserts that *There Was a Country* 'is a functional book that not so much tells the story of Achebe but the story of Nigeria using Achebe as a vehicle' (4). Looking at the issue from another angle, Moses Idika says that Achebe exhibited a great sense of patriotism by writing the book. 'Achebe has proven for the umpteenth time that his love for Nigeria

is simply everlasting...This essentially, apart from putting the record straight, is the reason why the book was written in the first place' (2). In his opinion, '*There Was a Country* therefore, is written to help Nigerians, since we have all gone into collective amnesia, to know where the rain started beating us as a nation so that we can begin to think, at least, how to get our body dry' (2). Furthermore, while George Ayittey says that philosophically speaking, the book is just a 'history and decidedly less ambitious' work, he labels the book Achebe's 'fascinating and gripping memoir of Biafra, the country his Igbo tribe sought to create by seceding from Nigeria' (1). It is quite obvious that the book is more than that as Sakina Badamasuiy corroborates when he argues that by writing the book Achebe 'has allowed us to see for the first time in gory detail, the unhealed wounds our nation still bears' (1). Seeing it in the same vein, Tim Ecott says that the book is 'a brave, clear-sighted treatment of political background and brutal reality of the Nigerian-Biafran War in which upwards of three million people, most of them children died, principally of starvation' (1). Having gone through all these, we intend therefore to delve into the kernel of our discussion which is to ascertain to what extent *There Was a Country* is not only Achebe's long standing sober reflection on Nigeria but an expression of his disappointingly squelched optimism of Nigeria and his fatherly call for a wholesale overhaul of our attitude and the placement of our unsavoury past experiences in focus so that the events of the past would not repeat themselves especially as he was getting closer to the expiration of his physical existence.

### **Echoes of Nostalgia, Disillusionment and Valediction in *There Was A Country: A Personal History of Biafra***

The title of the memoir '*There Was a Country*' has been subjected to multifarious interpretations, but whatever be the case, it evokes a dual feeling of heartfelt sweet and evergreen reminiscences

occasioned by a seemingly dashed optimism as well as a mournful longing for the return of an irretrievably passed glorious era. The country so referred to seems to be Nigeria before political independence as it is eloquently and glowingly painted by Achebe in the book. We see Achebe taking his mind back the memory lane to a period when in spite of the overwhelming presence of the imperialistic colonialists, almost all social and political institutions were working nearly perfectly well and people have the audacity to dream dreams and envision visions. 'Most members of my generation, who were born before Nigeria's independence, remember a time when things were very different. Nigeria was once a land of hope and progress, a nation with immense resources at its disposal – natural resources, yes but even more so human resources (2). This spirit is also espoused in another instance when Achebe recollects with palpable nostalgia, his days in Government College Umuahia. 'I grew up at a time when the colonial infrastructure celebrated hard work and high achievement, and so did our families and communities' (27). Commenting frantically in the same vein, he recalls his graduation from the University College Ibadan and the realistic high spirit and optimism that are associated with it. 'After my graduation I did not have to worry where I would go next. The system was so well organized that as we left university most of us were instantly absorbed into civil service, academia, business, or industry. We trusted, I did anyway – the country and its rulers to provide this preparatory education and a job to serve my nation' (29). He keeps recounting these memorable days. 'It has often been said that my generation was a very lucky one. And I agree. My luck was actually quite extraordinary. And it began quite early' (39). He isn't disputing the fact that his generation experienced the best of Nigeria so far and he stands among the luckiest of the lucky generation. Such chummy-unforgettable spirit of the past pervades the book as Nossiter rightly points out. 'He [Achebe] painted a

seductive picture of a Nigerian utopia, a country void of ethnic division or religious strife which he saw during his youthful years as a school boy' (1). The Nigeria that is floweringly described by Achebe sounds quite fable-like when placed side by side with the current reality. With this in mind, there is evidently a regretful tinge to the title as the author tries to compare this wonderful past with the chaotic nation that Nigeria has presently evolved to.

It is important to note that Achebe's nostalgia in the book is double pronged. While one is for Nigeria at its colonial era and few years after independence, another is for Biafra, the short-lived country that seceded from Nigeria. In that sense, Biafra during its early years of existence bears for the writer all the appurtenances of a full-fledged country. As one who worked hard and holds Biafra so dear and quite sacrosanct, Achebe in the book mourns the failure of Biafra as Adichie clearly remarks in her review. '*There was a Country* is striking for not being very personal in its account of the war. Instead it is a Nigerian nationalist lament for the failure of the giant that never was; Achebe is mourning Nigeria's failure, the greatest and most devastating of which was Biafra' (3). In the book, Achebe remembers Biafra with passion especially during the early days of the secession and even when territorial blockade induces hunger and suffering in the land, the people exhilaratingly savoured their freedom which to them was really in their grasp.

Beyond the understandable trepidation associated with a looming war, one found a new spirit among the people, a spirit one did not know existed, a determination, in fact. The spirit was that of a people ready to put in their best and fight for their freedom... But the most vital feeling Biafrans had at that time was that they were finally in a safe place...at home. This was the first and most important thing and one could see this sense of exhilaration in the effort that the people were putting into the war (171).

Nositter identifies this overriding flavour of nostalgia towards Biafra when he asserts that ‘mostly Achebe’s account is tinged with odd nostalgia for the ephemeral moment when Biafra seemed to birth a national culture’ (2). But in spite of the dearth of effective arms and resources to prosecute the war Biafrans displayed awesome ingenuity as highlighted by Dan Okey Chukwu who submits that ‘the creativity of the Biafrans during the war period demonstrated the inventive ingenuity of the black race. The ability of Biafra to copy, though successfully, the orthodox science and technology, through the use of local resources, shows that any nation can achieve self reliance with determined efforts’ (101). Achebe in the memoir also draws attention to this when he makes reference to the views of Richard West, ‘a British journalist [who being] so captivated by the meticulous nature with which Biafrans conducted the affairs of state...wrote a widely cited article in which he lamented. ‘Biafra is more than a human tragedy. Its defeat, I believe, would mark the end of African independence. Biafra was the first place I had been to in Africa, where the Africans themselves were truly in charge’ (172). Any one who has made out time to read *Ahiara Declaration*, Biafra’s momentous operational manual would not agree less with this journalist. Some social commentators have attributed Biafra’s capitulation to a strong conspiracy by the West who were appalled at the rise of a country of such towering force and resources in Africa, so conniving with Nigeria they made sure that it was utterly crushed.

In the midst of memorable recollections, Achebe creatively intertwines them with some painfully disappointing remembrances. In the book, while he mourns briefly for Biafra, he laments greatly for Nigeria. First, it is a result of total loss of hope in Nigeria by the Igbos as a result of the mass killings in the north that Biafra even came into being. Achebe’s disappointment in Nigeria is two fold. The first is before the war when in Lagos, it dawns on him that he

has been living on the false hope of being a Nigerian. 'As many of us packed our belongings to return east some of the people we had lived with for years, some for decades, jeered and said, 'Let them [Igbos] go; food will be cheaper in Lagos....I realized suddenly that I had not been living in my home; I had been living in a strange place' (68). In another instance, it seems that nobody is more Nigerian than him as it baffles him how Nigeria is grossly declining. 'I found it difficult to come to terms with the fact that Nigeria was disintegrating, that I had to leave my house in Lagos, leave my job...I was one of the last to flee Lagos. I simply could not bring myself to accept that I could no longer live in my nation's capital, although the facts clearly said so. My feeling for Nigeria was that of profound disappointment. Not only because mobs were hunting down and killing innocent civilians in many parts, especially the North, but because the federal government sat and let it happen' (70-71). For Adewale Sogunro, Achebe's feeling of uncontrollable disillusionment is rightly placed for 'he is a product of his time, a man that saw the dream and promise of Nigeria, but suddenly woke up to a nightmarish reality in which millions of innocent and precious Igbo lives were lost' (2). Consequently, some people who misread the underlying currents in the book seem to suggest that Achebe is more Biafran than Nigerian in the book but it appears they got it all wrong. Rather, *There Was a Country* is the heartrending lament of a highly disenchanted Nigerian. It is the hue and cry of a man whose towering optimism for his country has been wantonly squelched if not brazenly repudiated. Achebe in the book sees himself being forced to become a Biafran and later again turning back to become a Nigerian. Being a man of notable reticence who has gone through these stages of involuntary debilitating citizenship transitions, it takes a great deal of thought and effort for him to recount these harsh experiences and to put them down into a book.

As Achebe mourns for Nigeria, so he weeps for Biafra at the twilight of its existence and for the Igbo nation, long after the war. As the turn of events during the war indicate that Biafra days of existence are numbered, Achebe recounts the unfolding events with enormous pathos.

In Biafra, the Harmattan Season leading into 1970 was particularly harsh. I remember vividly the suffering of the people; everything seemed particularly bleak. The dry, sandy air seemed to be an additional torment, delighting in covering the body with layers of the Sahara Desert's fine dust, blown in from hundreds of miles away. This made it impossible for bare, weeping vulnerable skin lesions to heal. It was particularly hard on the children. Looking around one could see a proud, devastated people (222).

At that weakest point, Gowon launches a definitive well calculated final onslaught on Biafra.

Gowon was clearly in a bind. He responded to this predicament by sending off secret memos to relay the details of his final offensive, a scorched-earth policy to crush the Biafran resistance once and for all. By the middle of January 1970, the Nigerian troops had regained the upper hand decisively. Biafra for all terms and purposes was crushed emotionally, psychologically, financially, and militarily and it came crashing down soon after the new year began (223).

Caught in this palpitating scenario, Biafra succumbs as Achebe recalls. 'At the end of the thirty-month war Biafra was a vast smouldering rubble. The head count at the end of the war was perhaps three million dead...This high proportion was mostly children. The cost in human lives, made it one of the bloodiest civil wars in human history' (227). Consoling himself somehow, he however acknowledges that though the war dealt a terrible blow on the Igbo, they were not completely annihilated, 'Nigeria had not

succeeded in crushing the spirit of the Igbo people, but it had left us indigent, stripped bare, and stranded in the wilderness' (228).

Over forty years after the war ended, Achebe sadly recounts that Igbos are still stranded in Nigeria as the programme which the Federal government instituted to reintegrate and rehabilitate them seem not to have been effectively implemented. 'There are many international observers who believe that Gowon's actions after the war were magnanimous and laudable. There are tons of treatises 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 reasons for the country's continued backwardness, in my estimation' (235). This position is not singularly held by Achebe for according to Patrick Ukase, efforts at reintegrating the Igbos after the war were sloppily and hypocritically carried out. 'On paper, the government was actually on course on the part of national reconciliation and reintegration, while in practical terms, the implementation of the so-called post-war reconciliation programme christened the 3rs was a mere smokescreen, a myth and an illusion' (279). Reacting to Achebe's punchy remark about the reintegration of the Igbos, Odia Ofeimun realistically berates the Igbos for simply waiting to be reintegrated into Nigeria. In his words, 'a people so energetic and gutsy, pumping so much enterprise across the country should not be so self-neglecting as to be waiting for others to raise or de-marginalize them' (22). His argument is weighty and needs careful thought and consideration as he sees this as 'plain bad manner to blame other Nigerians, who have not found answers to their own problems' (22) to reintegrate them. The Igbos should rather change their *siddon-wait* attitude, re-strategize and develop workable ways of pushing themselves into Nigeria's political mainstream.

In spite of his deep-seated but searingly painful recollections of Nigeria's glorious past and its unfortunate heart-breaking plunge

into chaotic nepotism, as an elder statesman, most of Achebe's comments as recorded in *There Was a Country* are valedictory statements. Aware that his days on earth are fast thinning down, the memoir offers Achebe the best opportunity to give final counsel to some of his contemporaries and mostly to the younger succeeding generation. He makes excellent use of the medium and as fate would have it, five months after releasing the book he answered the irresistible call of nature. This categorically validates most of the thoughts he espoused in the book; making them to be somehow sacrosanct. In his review which was published in December 2012, Chidi Nwaonu after gauging Achebe's tonal urgency and immediacy prophetically declares thus: 'Professor Achebe is now old and will soon join his ancestors. I do not say this in a macabre way, for there is nothing wrong with an old man dying, especially when one can look up in(sic) his works and say they were good. So I look upon this book [*There Was a Country*] as his final gift to Nigeria, to look upon our country and our history and to own it whether we are from the north, south, east and west' (2). Just as he said, the book has become Achebe's last published work and characteristically, some comments in the book can truly be attested to be his final exhortations to Nigerians.

Bringing this position to the front burner in his critical analysis of the book, Moses Idika opines that 'Achebe being a very practical man, in his love for Nigeria has not just criticised Nigeria and the Nigerian problems, he has also proffered the way forward.' (3). Setting the tone for his paternal admonitions, Achebe wonders why the ugly experience of the Nigeria/Biafra war is not being extensively discussed. 'Why has the war not been discussed, or taught to the young, over forty years after its end? Are we perpetually doomed to repeat the mistakes of the past because we are too stubborn to learn from them?' (228). These are consciously invoked rhetorical comments that are aimed at reawakening

people's zeal to constructively discuss the war and the factors that led to it so that we will avoid such actions in the future but what Achebe may not know is that most history departments in Nigeria's educational institutions have almost completely collapsed and Nigerian youths are rarely reminded of their past. Having established that, he identifies the first thing that will be done to bring Nigeria back to the path of sustainable glory. '...Nigeria needed to liberate itself anew, this time not from a foreign power but from our own corrupt, inept brothers and sisters' (244). This touches on the issue of enemies in the fold who are more destructive than the externally recognized aggressors.

Writing further, Achebe explicitly points the way forward:

The road to a remedy of Nigeria's political problems will not come easily. The key, as I see it, lies in the manner in which the leadership of the country is selected... Nigerian will have to find a way to do away with the present system of godfatherism—an archaic, corrupt practice in which individuals with lots of money and time to spare (many of them half-baked, poorly educated thugs) sponsor their chosen candidates and push them right through to the desired political position, bribing, threatening, and, on occasion, murdering any opposition in the process (245).

He still has more parting words for Nigerians as he quickly reminds all of the need for patience and consistent determination as these are the hallmarks of nation building. 'We also realize that we must learn patience and not expect instant miracles. Building a nation is not something a people does in one regime or even in a few years; it's a very long process' (247). He appreciates current efforts aimed at democratizing Nigeria and calls for more concerted efforts. 'The last general election in Nigeria was not perfect, but overall it was an improvement over past travesties that were passed off as elections in Nigeria. The Independent national Electoral

Commission (INEC), Chairman (and professor) Attahiru Muhammadu Jega, and his team should be allowed to build upon the gains of that exercise for the good of nation' (247). On corruption, he warns that something urgent should be done to pragmatically confront the menace headlong. 'Corruption in Nigeria has passed the alarming and entered the fatal stage, and Nigeria will die if we continue to pretend that she is only slightly indisposed' (249).

In the beginning of the book he outlined the basis for writing the memoir thus: '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). Setting an example of the kind of reasonable reaction which he expects from Nigerians after going through the work, he requests that time is ripe for Nigerians to ask themselves some hard questions. Kick-starting the soul-searching, he sets agenda for the discussion:

Nigeria' story has not been, entirely, one long history of despair. Fifty years after independence Nigerians have begun to ask themselves the hard questions: How can the state of anarchy be reversed? Where are the measures that can be taken to prevent corrupt candidates from recycling themselves into positions of leadership?... How does Nigeria bring all the human and material resources it has to bear on its development? How do we clean up the Niger Delta? What do we need to do to bring an end to organised ethnic bigotry? How can we place the necessary checks and balances in place that will reduce the decadence, corruption, and debauchery of the past several decades?...And that would be a big debate to keep Nigeria busy for a long time (253).

He ends his elderly admonition on a positive note by foreseeing Nigeria overcoming all its present problems. 'I foresee the Nigerian solution will come in stages. First, we have to nurture and

strengthen our democratic institutions—and strive for the freest and fairest election possible. This will place the true candidates of the people in office... A new patriotic consciousness has to be developed, not one based simply on the well-worn notion of the unity of Nigeria or faith in Nigeria often touted by our corrupt leaders, but one based on an awareness of the responsibility of leaders to the led...It is from this kind of environment that a leader, humbled by the trust placed upon him by the people, will emerge, willing to use the power given to him for the good of the people' (253). With this, he unambiguously asserts his faith and hope that Nigeria will surely rise again.

### **Conclusion**

So far, we have identified elements of sweet reminiscences, disappointments and parting exhortations in Achebe's last published work and memoir *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra*. However, as he himself has said 'every generation must recognize and embrace the task it is particularly designed by history and providence to perform' (14). We have seen the numerous tasks fate bequeathed Achebe's generation and the extent to which they carried them out. Nigerians of present generation must squarely face the tasks destiny has placed on their hands so that they can forge a better and prosperous nation which will not only rekindle in them memories of Achebe's Nigeria of the early nineteen-forties and late fifties but will make them act decisively to restore such past glories and even surpass them. With that, unlike Achebe who died sadly lamenting that 'there was a country', they will proclaim with laughter that 'this is our country.' When that is done, Nigerians would have imbibed lessons from Achebe's painstakingly crafted memoir, asked themselves some hard questions and perhaps answered them by harkening to Achebe's genuinely heartfelt parting words. In Igboland, apart from the awesome aura and

excitement that herald the appearance of the big masquerade in a performance arena; its exit is not only spectacular but remarkably noticed. Chinua Achebe ever remains a magnificent man of letters; a big masquerade in literary circles, so while his entrance with *Things Fall Apart* was exceptional and earth-shaking, his exit with *There Was a Country* has also been earth-shattering and ground-breaking. Our generation is lucky to be witnesses to the life and time of Chinua Achebe, for in years to come, people will marvel if really, such legendarily artistic, courageous and patriotic writer, walked on the face of this earth.

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