

CHINUA ACHEBE'S APHORISTIC BIOGRAPHY: ANOTHER ROAD TAKEN ON THE PATH OF CRITICISM

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Biographical projects... are supposed to provide blueprints to individuals on what society, as a progressive and development-oriented institution expects from them, and of course, how to go about developing the attitude that is needed to fulfill such responsibilities. They should provide society with alternative role models, on whom lives of influence (not necessarily affluence) would be shaped. This is certainly why the Christian Holy Bible and the Muslim Holy Koran are nothing else but biographies, life stories of individuals that these faiths present to their followers as examples, and expect these faithfuls to aspire to the form, status and accomplishments of the biographees.

- Onyekwere Okpara & Ezechi Onyerionwu

Indeed, great biographies unwittingly sign-post their age and often provide the raw material for the history of an age or even the nation.

- Anya O. Anya

Philosophers must rule the society.

- Jostein Gaarder

Critics are like manure, they smell, but writers need them to mature.

- Charles E. Nnolim

Introduction

I have argued elsewhere that Chinua Achebe's truer self inheres in his scholarship; that though his creative output seems to afford him a wider readership patronage, he is more forthright in his critical engagement in which his avowed commitment as a literary player in the quest-game to achieve social change is more persuasive and functional and productive. To write creatively is to act and talk in parables, in mask; to write critically is to brave up whatever risks there are in addressing serious issues, even in a militant fashion. Chinua Achebe uses both media of artistry in expressing his ideas about the social tapestry of Nigeria and of Africa.

It is not just because Achebe earned professorship through his scholarship that we should agree that he has contributed more to the growth and development of our society via his scholarship. That is one of the reasons, though. It is via his critical works that he privileges us – more than he does in his creations – his signal, aphoristic unction. It is these aphorisms, these philosophies which Epicurus would see as very potent in their therapeutic effect on the man's soul (see Anele 21); philosophies this writer has said elsewhere as 'being the portfolio of morals,... [that] sparkle certain wits that mould our lives and define our goals and guide our footsteps' (143), such philosophies immanent in Achebe's critiques that this study is taxed to identify.

The formula to be used in parading these aphorisms is that of identifying any aphorism(s) that sprout(s) from each of his selected essays. This formula may not be the best of formulae, but it is expected to achieve the purpose of this study – that of clearly noting and certifying that Achebe is a philosopher who made enduring statements about our literatures, about our history, about our societies, and about life generally.

Let us start with Achebe's essay in his *Morning Yet on Creation Day*:

Preface - At University of Massachusetts, Amherst; in June, 1974

❖ I have no doubt that there will be some inclined to the view that it were better to forget the agonies of that past and turn the

mind to the marvellous achievements of 'reconciliation, rehabilitation and reconstruction.' I do not agree. (xiii)

- ❖ I believe that in our situation, the greater danger lies not in remembering but in forgetting, in pretending that slogans are the same truth; and that Nigeria, always prone to self-deception, stands in great need of reminders. (xiii)
- ❖ Experience is necessary for growth and survival. (xiii)

Colonialist Criticism – At Makerere University, Uganda
in January 1974

- ❖ Women are more honest than men in expressing their feelings. (8)
- ❖ For whatever faults the black man may have or whatever crimes he committed (and they were, and are, legion) he did not bring racism into the world. (11)
- ❖ And no matter how emancipated a man may wish to appear or how anxious to please by his largeness of heart he cannot make history simply go away. (11)
- ❖ Earnestness and its opposite, levity, may be neither good nor bad in themselves but merely appropriate or inappropriate according to circumstance. (14)
- ❖ I do appreciate... that the world is large and that all men cannot be, indeed must not be, of one mind. I appreciate that there are people in the world who have no need or desire to change anything. Perhaps they have already accomplished the right amount of change to ensure their comfort. Perhaps they see the need for change but feel powerless to attempt to, or perhaps they feel it is someone else's business. (14)
- ❖ If we fall back, can we complain that others are rushing forward? A man who does not lick his lips can he blame the harmattan for drying them? (18)

Africa and Her Writers – At Eliot House, Harvard
University, 1972

- ❖ Art is, and was always, in the service of man. (19)

- ❖ This Art exists independently of us, of all mankind. Man and his world may indeed pass away but not a jot from the laws of this Art. (19)
- ❖ The making of art is not the exclusive concern of a particular caste or secret society. (22)
- ❖ Art belongs to all, and is a 'function' of society. (22)
- ❖ The world may not wish to be saved by us if we had the power to do so. (24)
- ❖ When we too have over-reached ourselves in technical achievement without spiritual growth, we shall be entitled to despair. Or, who knows? (24-5)

Language and the Destiny of Man – At Dartmouth College, New Hampshire, in June, 1972

- ❖ In his long evolutionary history, man has scored few greater successes than his creation of human society. (30)
- ❖ Speech...seems so natural that we rarely give much thought to it or contemplate man's circumstance before its invention. But we know that language is not inherent in man – the capacity for language, yes; but not language. (30)
- ❖ For we all stand to lose when language is debased just as every one of us is affected when the nation's currency is devalued; not just the Secretary to the Treasury or controllers of our banks. (34)
- ❖ Every people has a body of myths or sacred tales received from its antiquity. (35)
- ❖ There is a way to hell even from the gates of heaven! (37)

What Do African Intellectuals Read? – at Leeds University, in 1965

- ❖ But there are other limiting factors besides time. The habit of reading itself is clearly the most important, for if it were strongly developed in our intellectuals, some of them at least would find the time. But the habit is simply not there. (38)
- ❖ African intellectuals are among the most widely travelled in the world today. Just as they are in high demand at embassy parties in their national capitals, so are they assiduously courted with

foreign scholarships, fellowship, travel grants and all kinds of business and professional junketing abroad. (41)

- ❖ Today things have changed a lot, but it would be foolish to pretend that we have fully recovered from the traumatic effects of our first confrontation with Europe. (44)
- ❖ Here then is an adequate revolution for me to espouse – to help my society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement... for no thinking African can escape the pain of the wound [of colonialism] in our soul. (44)

Where Angels Fear to Tread – In Lagos, 1962

- ❖ But theories and bogeys are no substitute for insight. (48)
- ❖ No man can understand another whose language he does not speak (and 'language' here does not mean simply words, but a man's entire world-view). (48)
- ❖ How many Europeans and Americans have our language? I do not know of any, certainly not among our writers and critics. (48)

**The African Writer and the English Language – At
University of Ghana, 1964**

- ❖ You cannot cram African literature into a small neat definition. (56)
- ❖ Any attempt to define African literature in terms which overlook the complexities of the African scene at the material time is doomed to failure. (56)
- ❖ I have indicated somewhat off-handedly that the national literature of Nigeria, and of many other countries of Africa, is, or will be, written in English. This may sound like a controversial statement, but it isn't. (57)
- ❖ I believe that in political and economic terms too this arbitrary creation called Nigeria hold out great prospect. Yet, the fact remains that Nigeria was created by the British – for their own ends. (57)

- ❖ Let us give the devil its due: colonialism in Africa disrupted many things, but it did create big political units where there were small, scattered ones before. (57)
- ❖ There is certainly a great advantage to writing in a world language. (59)
- ❖ So my answer to the question: *Can an African ever learn English well enough to be to use it effectively in creative writing?* is certainly yes. If on the other hand you ask: *Can he ever learn to use it like a native speaker?* I should say, I hope not. (61)
- ❖ I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings. (62)

Named for Victoria, Queen of England - In October, 1973

- ❖ I have probably spoken more words in Igbo than English but I have definitely written more words in English than Igbo. (67)
- ❖ We lived at the crossroads of cultures. We still do today. (67)
- ❖ Those who prefer to see Africa in...lurid terms have not themselves demonstrated any clear superiority in sanity or more competence in coping with life. (67)
- ❖ But things happen very fast in Africa. (70)
- ❖ What is bright can also get tarnished, like the military boys. (70)

Tanganyika – Jottings of a Tourist: In 1961

- ❖ Experts can be so foolish. (72)
- ❖ Personally, I think the future belongs to those who...are ready to take in new ideas. (75)
- ❖ In the end, life will favour those who come to terms with it, not those who run away. (75)
- ❖ Once in a while, you do come across a truly esoteric legend. (75)
- ❖ When the story of African resistance to European subjugation comes to be written the military exploits of Sultan Makwawa of the Wahehe will be given prominence and honour. (75)
- ❖ I like a residue of mystery always to remain. (77)

The African Writer and the Biafran Cause – At Makerere University College, Kampala, Uganda, 25/08/1968

- ❖ It is clear to me that an African creative writer who tries to avoid the big social and political issues of contemporary Africa will end up being completely irrelevant. (78)
- ❖ The fact is that some of the great issues of Africa have never been issues at all or else have ceased to be important for, say, Europeans. (78)
- ❖ It would be a ridiculous waste of energy to go through life fighting imaginary insults. (78)
- ❖ To go through life swallowing all insults is to compromise one's self-respect. (78)
- ❖ Whether we like to face to it or not, Africa has been the most insulted continent in the world. (78)
- ❖ No one arrogates to himself the right to order the lives of a whole people unless he takes for granted his own superiority over those people. (79)
- ❖ If an artist is anything, he is a human being with heightened sensitivities; he must be aware of the faintest nuances of injustice in human relations. (79)
- ❖ The African writer cannot...be unaware of, or indifferent to, the monumental injustice which his people suffer. (79)
- ❖ If the attitudes are wrong, then, a whole lot of other things go awry. (80)
- ❖ Depending on how it is given, a gift could become an insult, and a juicy morsel turn to gall. (80)
- ❖ No government, black or white, has the right to stigmatize and destroy groups of its own citizens without undermining the basis of its own existence. (83)
- ❖ Biafran writers are committed to the revolutionary struggle of their people for justice and true independence. (84)
- ❖ I believe our cause [as Biafran] is right and just. (84)

In Reply to Margery Perham - 19/09/68

- ❖ [Biafrans] see these murderers not only as Nigerians but the British and the Russians who provide the weapons with which the crime is committed. (86)

- ❖ Lord Lugard would have approved such anti-French sentiments as Dame Margery expresses today. But in the circumstances of British crimes against a sovereign African people, such sentiments are entirely frivolous. (80)

In Defence of English? An Open Letter to Mr Tai Solarin –

Lagos; 07/11/66

- ❖ It is not necessary for me, or anybody else for that matter, to rush to the defence of English in Nigeria: it seems more than able to defend itself. (87)

Onitsha, Gift of the Niger - 1973

- ❖ Onitsha was always the market-place of the world. (91)
- ❖ Onitsha had always attracted the exceptional, the colourful and the bizarre because it was itself colourful and bizarre. (91)
- ❖ Onitsha was the nursery of a burgeoning Igbo capitalism – a capitalism tempered albeit by the still strong traditional kindred concerns of the extended family and by the levelling mechanism in Igbo culture tempting and inducing a man to hand back his capital to his people in return for titles and decorations. (92)

***Chi in Igbo Cosmology* - University of Nigeria, Nsukka; 1972**

- ❖ No one talks naturally into a strange box of tricks! (94)
- ❖ Clearly, *Chi* has unprecedented veto powers over man's destiny. (96)
- ❖ If you want to know how life has treated an Igbo man, a good place to look is the names his children bear. His hopes, his fears, his joys and sorrows; his grievances against his fellows, or complaints about the way he has been used by fortune; even straight historical records, are all there. (96)
- ❖ A man of impeccable character may yet have a bad *chi* so that nothing he puts his hand to will work out right. (97)
- ❖ *Chi* is... more concerned with success or failure than with righteousness and wickedness. Which is not to say that it is totally indifferent to morality. (97)
- ❖ We should know by now that nothing is *totally* anything in Igbo thinking; everything is a question of measure and degree. (97)

- ❖ A person's fortunes in life are controlled more or less completely by his *chi*. (98)
- ❖ For what else is creation but the imparting of distinguishing characteristics and bestowing of gifts? (98)
- ❖ Wherever Something stands, no matter what, Something Else stands beside it. (99)
- ❖ No man however great can win judgement against all the people. (99)
- ❖ Chukwu Himself in all His power and glory did not make the world by fiat. (103)

Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays – 1965-87

Preface - At University of Massachusetts, Amherst, 1987

- ❖ I am not so naïve as to think that I have slain the monster of racist habit with one stroke of the essay. (x)

Impediments to Dialogue between North and South - 01-02-08

- ❖ The relationship between Europe and Africa is very old and also very special. (15)
- ❖ For centuries Europe has chosen the beastly alternative which automatically has ruled out the possibility of dialogue. You may talk to a horse, but you don't wait for a reply. (15)
- ❖ The white man has been talking and talking and never listening because he imagines he has been talking to a dumb beast. (15)

The Writer and His Community - At University of California
at Los Angeles; November, 1984

- ❖ The story told by the fireside does not belong to the story-teller once he has let it out of his mouth. (32)
- ❖ Artists, scientists and scholars may find fulfilment in their creative work, humanitarians in their service. (36)
- ❖ As it happens, the novel, even in its home of origin, has not behaved very well, it has always resisted the straight-jacket. What is more, being a robust art form, it has travelled indefatigably and picked up all kinds of strange habits. (37)

- ❖ Can anyone serious suggest that the novel proclaims no normality? (37)
- ❖ Of course, a Westerner would be most reluctant to destroy in a page or two, the very angle and paragon of creation – the individual hero. If indeed he has to be destroyed, it must be done expansively with detailed explanations and justifications, not to talk of lamentations. And he must be given as final tribute the limelight in which to speak a grand, valedictory soliloquy! (38)
- ❖ The Igbo are second to none in their respect of the individual personality. (39)
- ❖ No two persons, not even blood brothers, are created and accompanied by the same *Chi*. (39)
- ❖ What is required, we are told, is plays and films. Books are out of date! The book is dead, long live television! (40)
- ❖ I can see no situation in which I will be presented with the Draconic choice between reading books and watching movies; or between English and Igbo. For me, no either/or; I insist on both. Which, you might say, makes my life rather difficult and even a little untidy. But I prefer it that way. (41)

**The Igbo World and Its Art - At University of California,
Los Angeles, 1984**

- ❖ The Igbo world is an arena for the interplay of forces. It is a dynamic world of movement and of flux.(42)
- ❖ All extremism is abhorrent to the Igbo sensibility. (43)
- ❖ Art must interpret all human experience, for anything against which the door is barred can cause trouble. (44)

Thoughts on the African Novel - 04/12/73

- ❖ African literature would define itself in action; so why not leave alone? (49)
- ❖ Be careful, for one hour is enough to do a man in. (62)
- ❖ I always find thoughts antagonistic to my secure position floating dangerously around it. (63)

- ❖ But Africa is not only a geographical expression; it is also a metaphysical landscape – it is in fact a view of the world and of the whole cosmos perceived from a particular position. (63)
- ❖ I fully realize that I am beginning to sound like a bad dictionary – the type you take a strange word to and it defines it with a stranger word. (63)
- ❖ Anxiety can hinder creative performance, from sex to science. (67)
- ❖ I have no doubt at all about the existence of the African novel. This form of fiction has seized the imagination of many African writers and they will use it according to their differing abilities, sensibilities and visions without seeking anyone's permission. I believe it will grow and prosper. I believe it has a great future. (67)
- ❖ I do hope that the great African novel will not be about a disreputable European. (67)

Work and Play in Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* - At

University of Ibadan; 15th July, 1977

- ❖ We *give* work and struggle; and in the end we *take* rest and fulfilment. (70)
- ❖ A promise is no less than a pledge for future work. (75)

Kofi Awoonor as a Novelist – 1971

- ❖ The future is unavailable. It has to be met. (86)

The Truth of Fiction - At University of Ife, 1978

- ❖ Art is man's constant effort to create for himself a different order of reality from that which is given to him; an aspiration to provide himself with a second handle on existence *through his imagination*. (95-6)
- ❖ Man's desire for fictions goes with his ability for making them, just as his need for language is inseparable from his capacity for speech. (97)
- ❖ All attempts to define man neatly must fail because of his complexity. (97)

- ❖ Given our questioning nature the end of which is discovery, and given our existential limitations especially the vastness of our imagination confer on us. (99)
- ❖ Our imagination can narrow the existential gap by giving us in a wide range of human situations the closest approximation to experience that we are ever likely to get, and sometimes the safest too, as anyone who has travelled on Nigerian road can tell! (99)
- ❖ The lessons of history are important. (100)
- ❖ ...And in any case what great solace can many of us recent colonials derive from an effective history which is so nasty, British and short? (100) (my underscore)
- ❖ Such people [who do not read novels] are to be pitied; they are like a six-cylinder car which says: Oh, I can manage all right on three sparkling-plugs, thank you very much. Well, it can manage somehow but it will sound like an asthmatic motor cycle! (101)
- ❖ The life of the imagination is a vital element of our total nature. If we starve it or pollute it, the quality of our life is depressed or soiled. (10)
- ❖ We are totally wrong when we imagine that self-centredness is smart. (102)
- ❖ Privilege, you see, is one of the great adversaries of the imagination; it spreads a thick layer of adipose tissue over our sensibility. (102)
- ❖ Imaginative identification is the opposite of indifference; it is human connectedness at its most intimate. It is one step better than the golden rule. (103)
- ❖ When a desperate man wishes to believe something however bizarre or stupid, nobody can stop him. He will discover in his imagination a willing and enthusiastic accomplice. (105)
- ❖ The fiction which imaginative literature offers us... does not enslave; it liberates the mind of man. Its truth is not like the canons of an orthodoxy or the irrationality of prejudice and superstition. It begins as an adventure in self-discovery and ends in wisdom and human conscience. (105)

What Has Literature Got to Do with It? - At Sokoto; 13/08/86

- ❖ Man is a goal-setting animal. (106)
- ❖ We do have in this country chiliastic expectations such as health for all in the magic year of 2000. (106)
- ❖ We don't really need a Ph.D. in agriculture to tell us when our stomach is empty, do we? If we are in reasonable health we should all carry around with us reliable, in-built alarm systems popularly called hunger to appraise us of our condition! (108)
- ❖ Italian products over the widest range are superior not in durability, not in engineering excellence, not in lower cost. They are better in design, and the consequent industrial success are the result of centuries of recognition of – including *massive subsidy* to – the arts. (109)
- ❖ The cry all around is for more science and less humanities... we have rushed to create universities of technology...to demonstrate our priorities as well as confusions. (111)
- ❖ The mind and the will belong first and foremost to the domain of stories. (116)

**Postscript: James Baldwin (1924-1987) - At University of
Massachusetts, Amherst, 16/12/87**

- ❖ Principalities and powers do not tolerate those who interrupt the sleep of their conscience. (120)
- ❖ As long as injustice exists, whether it be within the African nation itself or between it and its neighbours; as long as a tiny cartel of rich, creditor nations can hold the rest in iron chains of usury; so long as one-third or less of mankind eats well and often to excess while two-thirds and more live perpetually with hunger; as long as white people who constitute a mere fraction of the human race consider it natural and even righteous to dominate the rainbow majority whenever and wherever they are thrown together; and – the oldest of them all – the discrimination by men against women, as long as it persists; the words of James Baldwin will be there to bear witness and to inspire and elevate the struggle for human freedom. (121)

An Image of Africa (Hamner, *Joseph Conrad*)

- ❖ When a writer, while pretending to record scenes, incidents and their impact, is in reality engaged in inducing hypnotic stupor in his readers through a bombardment of emotive words and other forms of trickery, much more has to be at stake than stylistic felicity. (121)
- ❖ The question is whether a novel [*Heart of Darkness*] which celebrates this dehumanization, which depersonalizes a portion of human race, can be called a great work of art. My answer is: No, it cannot. (125)
- ❖ I would not call the man an artist... who composes an eloquent instigation to one people to fall upon another and destroy them. No matter how striking his imagery or how beautiful his cadences fall, such a man is no more a great artist than another may be called a priest who reads the mass backwards or a physician who poisons his patients. (125)
- ❖ The time is long overdue for taking a hard look at the work of creative artists who apply their talents...to set people against people. (125)
- ❖ Whereas irrational love may at worst engender foolish acts of indiscretion, irrational hate can endanger the life of a community. (126)
- ❖ It is no concern of fiction to please people about whom it is written. (126)
- ❖ As a sensible man, I will not accept just any traveller's tales solely on the grounds that I have not made the journey myself. I will not trust the evidence even of a man's very eyes when I suspect them to be as jaundiced as Conrad's.
- ❖ Travellers with closed minds can tell us little except about themselves. (127)
- ❖ Indeed, travelers can be blind. (127)

The Novelist as Teacher (ed. Olaniyan & Quayson, *African*)

- ❖ We have learnt from Europe that a writer or an artist lives on the fringe of society – wearing a beard and a peculiar dress and generally behaving in a strange, unpredictable way. The last thing society would dream of doing is to put him in charge of anything. (103)

- ❖ I don't know if African writers always have foreign audience in mind. What I do know is that they don't have to. At least, I know that I don't have to. (103)
- ❖ No self-respecting writer will take dictation from his audience. He must remain free to disagree with his society and go into rebellion against it if need be. (104)
- ❖ We do have our own sins and blasphemies recorded against our name. If I were God, I would regard as the very worst our acceptance – for whatever reason – of racial inferiority. It is too late in the day to get worked up about it or to blame others, much as they may deserve such blame and condemnation. What we need to do is to look back and try and find out where we went wrong, were the rain began to beat us. (104)
- ❖ Today, things have changed a lot, but it would be foolish to pretend that we have fully recovered from the traumatic effects of our first confrontation with Europe. (105)
- ❖ I think it is part of my business as a writer to teach that ... there is nothing disgraceful about the African weather, that the palm-tree is a fit subject for poetry. (105)
- ❖ No thinking African can escape the pain of the wound in our soul [courtesy of the colonial master]. (105)
- ❖ The writer cannot expect to be excused from the task of re-education and regeneration that must be done. In fact, he should march right in front. For he is after all... the sensitive point of his community. (105)
- ❖ I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past – with all its imperfections – was not one long night of savagery from which the first European acting on God's behalf delivered them. (105)

**The University and the Leadership Factor in Nigerian Politics -
At Nsukka 23/09/86**

- ❖ We know what we should do and refuse to do it. Instead we are 'blowing grammar' all over the country as if our problem stemmed from insufficient argument. (4)

- ❖ My thesis is that without good leadership none of the other problems stands a chance of being tackled let alone solved. (6)
- ❖ I do not believe that someone somewhere and sometime had already wrapped up all the thinking the world would ever need and that our responsibility today is merely to follow some shepherd like a lot of sheep. (11)
- ❖ Leadership is a sacred trust like the priesthood in civilized, humane religions. No one gets into it lightly and unadvisedly, because it demands qualities of mind and discipline of body and will, far beyond the needs of the ordinary citizen. Anybody who offers himself or herself or is offered to society must be aware of the unusually high demands of the role and should, if any doubt whatsoever, firmly refuse the prompting. (12)
- ❖ Sometimes one hears apologists of poor leadership ask critics if they would do better if they were in the shoes of the leader. It is a particularly silly question the answer to which is that the critic is not in or gunning for the leader's shoes, and, therefore, how he might walk in them does not arise. (12-13)
- ❖ Under normal circumstances, political institutions provide the over-arching structure of human society. (14)
- ❖ A word is more likely to become abuse when the concept it represents becomes corrupted. (15)
- ❖ Even the armies of People's Democracies have not succeeded in obliterating the line between the commander and the commanded. (16)
- ❖ A counterfeit elite...inflicts double jeopardy on the society. (17)
- ❖ If we cannot compel greatness in our leaders we can at least demand basic competence. (19)
- ❖ We can insist on good, educated leaders while we pray for great ones. (19)
- ❖ Even divine leaders have needed precursors to make straight their way. (19)
- ❖ The university men who had sailed forth into national politics have had a rather dismal record. No one can point to any shining achievement in national politics, which the nation can recognize as the peculiar contribution of university men. (22)

- ❖ It is imperative that the Nigerian university must set about cleaning up its act. It must go back to work so as to produce that salt of excellence, which the nation relies on it to drop into the boiling soup pot of Nigerian leadership. (23)

The Trouble with Nigeria

Preface

- ❖ The inspiration and the vigour come from them; the weaknesses and flaws are mine. (ix)

Where the problem lies

- ❖ The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. There is nothing basically wrong with the Nigerian character...The Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which are the hallmarks of true leadership. (1)
- ❖ That the character of one man could establish that quantum change in a people's social behaviour was nothing less than miraculous. But it shows that social miracles *can* happen. (1)
- ❖ A leader's no-nonsense reputation might induce a favourable climate but in order to effect lasting change it must be followed up with a radical programme of social and economic re-organization or at least a well-conceived and consistent agenda of reform which Nigeria stood for, and stands for, in dire need of. (1)
- ❖ What I am saying is that Nigeria is not beyond change. I am saying that Nigeria *can* change today if she discovers leaders who have the will, the ability and the vision. (1)
- ❖ If ... conscious effort is not made, good leaders, like good money, will be driven out by bad. (2)
- ❖ There is a great danger in consigning a life-and-death issue to the daily routine of small talk. No one can do much about the weather: we must accept it and live with or under it. But national bad habits are a different matter: we resign ourselves to them at our peril. (2)
- ❖ I believe that Nigeria is a nation favoured by providence. (2)

- ❖ Does it ever worry us that history which neither personal wealth nor power can pre-empt will pass terrible judgement on us, pronounce anathema on our names when we have accomplished our betrayal and passed on? (3)
- ❖ We have lost twentieth century; are we bent on seeing that our children also lose the twenty-first? God forbid! (3)

Tribalism

- ❖ Nothing in Nigeria's political history captures her problem of national integration more graphically than the chequered fortune of the word, *tribe*, in her dictionary. (5)
- ❖ *What is your tribe?* 'I am a Nigerian,' they would say haughtily, drawing themselves to their fullest height. Though alive and well, tribe ha[s] an embarrassing odour. (6)
- ❖ Prejudice against 'outsiders' or 'strangers' is an attitude one finds everywhere. But no modern state can lend its support to such prejudice without undermining its own progress and civilization. (7)

False Image of Ourselves

- ❖ One of the commonest manifestations of under-development is a tendency among the ruling elite to live in a world of make-believe and unrealistic expectations. This is the *cargo cult* mentality that anthropologists sometimes speak about. (9)
- ❖ Listen to Nigerian leaders and you will frequently hear the phrase, *this great country of ours*. (9)
- ❖ Nigeria is not a great country. It is one of the most disorderly nations in the world. It is one of the most corrupt, insensitive inefficient places under the sun. It is one of the most expensive countries and one of those that give least value for money. It is dirty, callous, noisy, ostentatious, dishonest and vulgar. In short, it is among the most unpleasant places on earth! (9-10)
- ❖ Nigeria may be a paradise for adventures or pirates, but not tourists. (10)
- ❖ I know enough history to realize that civilization does not fall down from the sky; it has always been the result of people's toil

and sweat, the fruit of their long search for order and justice under brave enlightened leaders. (10)

- ❖ Nigerians are what they are only because their leaders are *not* what *they* should be. (10)

Leadership, Nigerian-Style

- ❖ An absence of objectivity and intellectual rigour at the critical moment of nation's formation is more than an academic matter. It inclines the fledgling state to disorderly growth and mental deficiency. (11-12)
- ❖ Unity can only be as good as the purpose for which it is desired. (12)
- ❖ Unfortunately, Nigerians are not famous. (13)
- ❖ *Justice* never prompts the question: Justice for what? (13)

Patriotism

- ❖ In spite of the tendency of people in power to speak about this great nation of ours, there is no doubt that Nigerians are among the world's most unpatriotic people. But this is not because Nigerians are particularly evil or wicked; in fact, they are not. It is rather because patriotism, being part of an unwritten social contract between a citizen and the state cannot exist where the state reneges on the agreement. (15)
- ❖ Who is a patriot? It is a person who loves his country. It is not a person who *says* he loves his country. It is not even a person who shouts or swears or recites or sings his love of his country. He is one who *cares* deeply about the happiness and well-being of his country and all its people. Patriotism is an emotion of love directed by a critical intelligence. (15)
- ❖ But doomed is the nation which permits such [selfish] people to define patriotism for it. (16)
- ❖ True patriotism is possible only when the people who rule and those under their power have a common and genuine goal of maintaining the dispensation under which the nation lives. (16)
- ❖ National pledges and pious admonitions administered by the ruling classes or their paid agents are entirely useless in fostering true patriotism. (16)

- ❖ One shining act of bold, selfless leadership at the top, such as unambiguous refusal to be corrupt or tolerate corruption at the fountain of authority, will radiate powerful sensation of well-being and pride through every nerve and artery of national life. (17)

Social Injustice and the Cult of Mediocrity

- ❖ Less advertised but no less damaging to social morality is the advantage which tribalism may confer on mediocrity. (19)
- ❖ Social injustice is ... not only a matter of morality but also of sheer efficiency and effectiveness. (19)
- ❖ Nigeria...is a country where it would be difficult to point to *one* important job held by the most competent person we have. I stand to be corrected! (19)
- ❖ We have displayed a consistent inclination since we assumed management of our own affairs to opt for mediocrity and compromise, to pick a third and fourth eleven to play for us. (19-20)
- ❖ Whereas tribalism might win enough votes to install a reactionary jingoist in a tribal ghetto, the cult of mediocrity will bring the wheels of modernization grinding to a halt throughout the land. (20)
- ❖ Look at our collapsing public utilities, our inefficient and wasteful parastatals and state-owned companies. If you want electricity, you buy your own generator; if you want water, you sink your own bore-hole; if you want to travel, you set up your own airline. One day soon... you will have to build your own post office to send your letters! (20)
- ❖ It is sufficient to say that whenever merit is set aside by prejudice of whatever origin, individual citizens as well as the nation itself are victimized. (22)
- ❖ As a class, you and I and our friends who compromise the elite are incredibly blind. We refuse to see what we do not want to see. That is why we have not brought about the changes which our society must undergo or be written off. (25)
- ❖ We say thoughtlessly that politics is a game of numbers. So it is. The masses own the nation because they have the numbers.

And when they move they will do it knowing that God loves them or He would not have made so many of them. (25)

Indiscipline

- ❖ Indiscipline is a failure or refusal to submit one's desires and actions to the restraints of orderly social conduct in recognition of the rights and desires of others. The goal of indiscipline is self-interest, its action, the abandonment of self-restraint in pursuit of the goal. (27)
- ❖ Discipline is either self-discipline or it is nothing at all. (28)
- ❖ There is indeed no better place to observe the thrusting indiscipline in Nigerian behaviour than on the roads. (29)
- ❖ We have given ourselves over so completely to selfishness that we hurt not only those around us but ourselves even more deeply and casually that one must assume a blunting of the imagination and sense of danger of truly psychiatric proportions. (30)
- ❖ Rampaging selfishness is another name for indiscipline, and its prime objective is to free the [people] from a constraining sense of another and of fair-play. (30)
- ❖ If a leader lacks discipline, the effect is apt to spread automatically down to his followers. (31)
- ❖ Unlucky is the country where indiscipline is seen by ordinary people as the prerogative of the high and mighty. (33)
- ❖ Security is hindered, not enhanced, in a climate of hooliganism. (35)
- ❖ I am prepared to leave the matter of security to those who claim expertise in the matter. I will only remind them and those who heed their advice that there are more political assassinations in mentally under-developed countries which indulge in the celebration and brandishing of power than in mature countries which sublimate it. But as our people might say: wetin be my concern there? (35)

Corruption

- ❖ One of the penalties of exalted power is loneliness. (37)
- ❖ Corruption in Nigeria has *passed* the alarming and *entered* the fatal stage; and Nigeria will die if we keep pretending that she is only slightly indisposed. (38)
- ❖ We have become so used to talking in millions and billions that we have ceased to have proper respect for the sheer size of such numbers. (40)

The Igbo Problem

- ❖ Origin of the national resentment of the Igbo is as old as Nigeria and quite as complicated. (46)
- ❖ There is no doubt in my mind that the competitive individualism and the adventurous spirit of the Igbo are necessary ingredients in the modernization and development of Nigerian society. (49)
- ❖ It is neither necessary, nor indeed possible, to suppress them. Nigeria without the inventiveness and the dynamism of the Igbo would be less hopeful place than it is. (49)

The Example of Aminu Kano

- ❖ The ethnic and other divisions which the politician inflicts so assiduously on the nation in his patriotic pursuit of electoral goals do not benefit the voter in any way. (53)
- ❖ We have stood too long on the side-line. (53)
- ❖ The politics of the second Republic have demonstrated the Shavian conceit that the only thing we learn from experience is that we learn nothing from experience. (54)
- ❖ Bans are always an admission of failure. (54)
- ❖ It did not seem to bother... [an Igbo man] that in no known tradition of socialist thought... can you be allowed to pass off millionaire, land-grabbers as promising material for social reconstruction. (56)
- ❖ I can see no rational answer to the chaotic jumble of tragic and tragic-comical problems we have unleashed on ourselves in the past. (62)
- ❖ No one who reduces the high purpose of politics which they exemplified down to a swinish scramble can hope to do so without bringing a terrible judgement on himself. (63)

The above granary of wisdom, of information, of re-sensitization, of remembrance, of (re)education, provide a path into the soul of Chinua Achebe. Yes, they provide a portrait of him.

What else can we say? Here are some of Chinua Achebe's words on the marble, words which would go in the aeon of history as enduring words of wisdom, of education, of enlightenment, of revelation, of the pulse and fever of our life. They are good for our life and living. They are food for thought. And they do our lives a lot of good(ness). For philosophies, like the gospel, are edifying to man's soul. Therefore, Achebe has edified us with his words that demand us to classify him among the wittiest and wisest writers of our time.

Be reminded that the above aphorisms are extracted from the best – honestly, not a panorama – of his essayistic endeavours. These seeds of truth *apropos* of our literatures, our societies, our cultures, our lives and living – one is not oblivious of several others unmentioned – have not been entirely plucked out. As the author of such gifts still lives and as he is ripe in his geriatric status, we do not doubt that whatever he utters is more or less philosophical. So from this living history, this tome of wisdom, this combatant of colonialism/racism, this critical activist, this moral personality, this professor of humanity, this urbanely brash scholar, we are optimistic of mining philosophies whose values and list would count *ad infinitum*.

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