

## THE COMATOSE STATE OF NIGERIAN DEMOCRACY: A REVIEW OF ACHEBE'S *THE TROUBLE WITH NIGERIA*

---

**Maureen Amaka Azuike**

Department of English, Faculty of Arts,  
University of Jos, Plateau State, Nigeria.

Email: [amakaazuike@gmail.com](mailto:amakaazuike@gmail.com)

---

### Introduction

According to Chinue Achebe of blessed memory, the trouble with Nigeria is purportedly the trouble with the whole of Africa as he has graphically portrayed in his eponymous book. Achebe, however, specifically blames the crippling effects of years of unguarded corruption, ineptitude, tactlessness, moral depravity as well as the mental bankruptcy of Nigeria's leaders for being responsible for Nigeria's current woes. Over thirty nine years ago, the writer predicted cataclysm as the bane of the Nigerian nation except all necessary ingredients for a successful democracy were put in place. Achebe's passionate analysis of Nigeria back then exposed (and still exposes) a democratic leadership which was totally asphyxiated by years of incompetence. Any African democracy where the leader rules without any sense of responsibility and patriotism, Achebe warns in his book must brace up for years and years of misery and unquantifiable grief and bloodshed. For Nigeria's democracy to thrive, indeed for African democracy to survive, Achebe recommends that transparency in governance must be imbibed. He further encourages an end to the draconian style of leadership which creates an atmosphere of fear, violence and distrust. In addition to this, the citizens of the nation must pay due respect to fundamental human rights and the rule of law and must desist from the celebration of mediocrity instead of productivity. These are, Achebe opines, among the surest ways to guarantee equality of opportunities in Nigeria and also the surest way to enthrone lasting democracy.

### Discussion

*The Trouble with Nigeria* is a tiny but powerful book which mercilessly lampoons the politicians of Achebe's time and still casts great aspersions on present day Nigeria's democratic dispensation. In the opening paragraph of the book, Achebe lambasts Nigerian leadership when he unequivocally states that "the trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership" (1). Achebe further reiterates that:

*There is nothing basically wrong with the Nigerian character.  
There is nothing wrong with the Nigerian land or climate or*

*water or air or anything else. 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).*

Achebe challenges the "national bad habits" (2) of Nigerians which include: corruption, gross inequities...noisy vulgarity...selfishness and ineptitude... (2) and which are gravely responsible for their going to the polls to elect vile leaders who "make so little impact on the lives of the nation's citizens" (2). Achebe's book accuses Nigerian leaders of looting countless billions of Naira. In what seems like a lamentation of Nigeria's leaders' misconduct, Achebe tells us thus:

*Providence poured into our national coffers... money... which would have been enough to launch this nation into the middle rank of developed nations and transformed the lives of our poor and needy. But what have we done with it? Stolen and salted away by people in power and their accomplices... Squandered... Embezzled...and Consumed... (2-3).*

Although the opening pages of *The Trouble with Nigeria* tend to aptly summarize Nigeria's political woes, Achebe succinctly and systematically dissects the issues at stake. He attributes the breakdown of the Nigerian state to tribalism and to lack of patriotism, among other things. He declares rather vehemently that:

*Nothing in Nigeria's political history captures her problem of national integration more graphically than the chequered fortune of the word tribe in her vocabulary. Tribe has been accepted at one time as a friend, rejected as an enemy at another and finally smuggled in through the backdoor as an accomplice.*

Achebe defines tribalism in Nigeria as "the death of a dream-Nigeria" in which a citizen could live and work in a place of his choice anywhere, and pursue any legitimate goal (5). He equally laments that "prejudice against outsiders or strangers is an attitude one finds everywhere" (7) and he perceives Nigerians as the most "unpatriotic people" (15) in the world. According to Achebe, a true patriot is defined as follows:

*...A person who loves his country. He is not a person who says he loves his country. He 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 her people (15).*

Furthermore the true patriotic Nigerian, according to Achebe, "will always demand the highest standards of his country and accept nothing but the best for and from his people" (15). Achebe prophesies a better future for Nigeria "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). Achebe attributes the commonest manifestations of under-development of a nation to "a tendency of the ruling elite to live in a world of make-believe and unrealistic expectations" (9).

In other words, Nigerians are perceived by Achebe as a people who ironically dream of "a fairy ship that will dock in their harbor laden with every goody they have always dreamed of possessing" (9) without doing much to achieve this dream of success. Many Nigerians are portrayed in *The Trouble with Nigeria* as "lotus eaters" who would rather "reap from where they have cultivated nothing". A true leader by Achebe's definition is not he or she who has "monopoly of political wisdom". Nwosu (Qtd in *The News* 2012: 18) concurs that a true leader is indeed "sincere and ready to do what his people want. Once a forthright person steps forward and begins to do what the people want, they start to follow and obey him". Rather than having an "all hands on deck" approach to leadership in Nigeria, what obtains is what Achebe has described as "leadership, Nigerian style". Achebe expatiates this as when a leader has a poverty of thought...or when he is displaying the seminal absence of intellectual rigour in political thought...and showing a tendency to pious materialistic woolliness and self-centred pedestrianism (11). Furthermore, Achebe reiterates that leadership, Nigerian style, only produces selfish leaders with a paucity of intelligence and an overdose of selfishness. To such leaders, Achebe says, "Justice and Honesty" do not mean a thing!

When "social injustice and the cult of mediocrity" tend to pervade a nation, Achebe predicts a cataclysmic end for such a nation. He laments that:

*The greatest sufferer is the nation itself which has to contain the legitimate grievance of a wronged citizen; accommodate the incompetence of a favoured citizen and more important and of greater scope, endure a general decline of morale and subversion of efficiency caused by an erratic system of performance and reward (19).*

Nigerian leaders, Achebe says, have eschewed all forms of decorum in their handling of Nigerian affairs. "We will buy, hire or steal technology" says one of the ministers (19). Achebe sees this allegedly insane outburst as evidence of mediocrity and a sheer compromise of moral standards. Social injustice is seen to pervade all sectors of Nigerian economy. In addition, Nigeria is seen by Achebe as a nation where the gap between the highest and the lowest paid public servants is forever widening. However, when it comes to looting the national treasures, Achebe sees "the elite of Nigeria as totally inconsiderate and selfish". He also sees Nigeria as a nation where "government financial experts went to work and produced new salary scales which gave more money to the people at the top than it gave to the grumbling cadres below" (23). Achebe graphically captures the suffering Nigerian masses as "...the real victims of our callous system, the wretched of the earth. They are largely silent and invisible. They don't appear on front pages, they do not initiate industrial actions. They drink bad water and suffer from all kinds of preventable diseases. There are no hospitals within reach of them, but even if there were they couldn't afford to attend. There may be a school of sorts which their children go to when there is free education and withdrawn from when levies are demanded (24).

Achebe's sympathy lies with the masses, majority of whom are poor. He further laments that they are "people whom the politician pays a siren-visit once in four years and promises to give them this and that...but never says that what he gives is theirs in the first place" (24). According to Achebe, indiscipline takes an ugly toll on a defaulting nation. The word of God also has a strong advice, in his opinion, against indiscipline or against any form of temptation as revealed in James 1: 12 which says "blessed is the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love Him". As Achebe's book points out, Nigerians and their leaders are used to a climate of indiscipline:

*Indiscipline pervades our life so completely today that one may be justified in calling it the condition par excellence of contemporary Nigerian society. We see and hear and read about indiscipline in the home, in the school, in the public service, in the private sector, in government and in legislative assemblies, on the roads, in the air (27).*

Will indiscipline ever dissipate from the Nigerian climate? Achebe answers this question as follows:

*In such a (Nigerian) climate there will always be sporadic incidents of indiscipline because there will always be people*

*who on account of their immaturity, mental incompetence, sheer devilry or even innocent exuberance are unable or unwilling to impose the internal break of self-discipline on their desires and actions (28).*

Chinua Achebe predicts Nigeria's problems in *The Trouble with Nigeria* as "getting worse by the day" (28). Among other things, religious intolerance continues to grow by the minute and to take numerous lives in its wake. According to Achebe "the result is there for all to see - the daily, nay hourly, massacre of our citizens often in the most active and productive periods of their lives and in such numbers every year.... (29). Religious intolerance always leaves behind, Achebe opines, its destruction. There are always scores of "maimed and battered survivors...and bills" (29) to offset. He blames "a rampaging selfishness" on indiscipline and on religious intolerance among Nigerians. He further states the mindset that many Nigerians have towards others as that of "...he is where I want to be; he must give way to me...."

With the mindset mentioned above Achebe foresees another civil war erupting if care is not taken. His powerful and prophetic book screams out this warning to the Nigerian populace. Furthermore, Achebe reiterates that "the craze for wealth" by Nigerians is a recipe for disaster since Nigerians would rather accord priority to the pursuit of selfish interests than to common good. Achebe warns that when a leader has no restraint, his indiscipline is a colossal problem because such a leader will appear the "envy of the powerless who will turn him into a role model and imitate his actions of indiscipline" (32). Achebe has the following as his final take on indiscipline in Nigeria:

*Unlucky is the country where indiscipline is seen by ordinary people as the prerogative of the high and mighty. For, by the same token, discipline will be seen as a penalty which the rank and file must pay for their powerlessness. The consequences of such a view on the mental attitudes of a people are too glaring for words (33-34).*

The Nigerian climate is perceived as "the climate of hooliganism" (35) and according to Achebe, even "security is hindered, not enhanced" (35) in such a climate. The question that Achebe seeks an answer to in his book is: must violence or oppression be the only reward for the holistic transformation of a society? The lachrymal outburst captured below tends to categorically sum up Achebe's views in his book:

*Is there no one in this country perceptive enough to understand that after two decades of bloodshed what our society craves today is not a style of leadership which projects and celebrates the violence of power but the sobriety of peace (34).*

*The Trouble with Nigeria* is an insightful commentary on how Nigerians can meet the difficult challenges of securing the nation, especially against insurgency or current terrorist attacks. Achebe points out the first steps towards tackling the insurgency problems as those of informing the mind, stemming corruption, immaturity and mental incompetence (28) and working together to achieve a common goal of maintaining peace. For instance, "...a well informed mind will understand the dangers inherent in risky behaviour.... A well informed mind will be in a better position to make the right choices in life...knowing in the mind what is right and what is wrong (Azuike Qtd in Lar, 389-390). Achebe's book agrees with the opinion given by Eisler and Miller which states that to obtain "...a democratic and humane society requires qualities such as freedom, creativity, social responsibility and commitment to moral and ethical ideals that transcend self-interest and corporate profits" (4). It is also implied by Achebe's book that "violent conflicts certainly have deleterious effects" on a nation's socio-economic development. Attending to the security needs of a nation, thus, helps to create and sustain a culture of peace.

Therefore, the key to fighting insecurity as Achebe opines in his book is to get more Nigerians to be actively engaged in various spheres of human endeavour. "Joblessness breeds violent derelicts". And derelicts live their lives fermenting trouble! Nigerians also need a principled and tested leader who will act as an agent of change and whose sole purpose, while in office, is to tackle corruption and facilitate the massive overhaul that the country needs in all her sectors. Corruption is said to be endemic among Nigerians because past Nigerian leaders have failed to tackle the problem. Let us hear him:

*My frank and honest opinion is that anybody who can say that corruption in Nigeria has not yet become alarming is either a fool, a crook or else does not live in this country (37).*

If nothing is done to permanently stamp out corruption in Nigeria, Achebe says that "...Nigeria will die..." (38). He further reiterates that "keeping an average Nigerian from being corrupt is like keeping a goat from eating yam (38).

*Nigerians are corrupt because the system under which they live today makes corruption easy and profitable; they will cease to be corrupt when corruption is made difficult and inconvenient (38).*

Nigerians are guilty of stealing public funds with impunity. Achebe says "it is...the prime ambition of so many to steal so much from the nation" (40). Unless urgent steps are taken to forestall the devastating effects of corruption in the system, Achebe concludes that Nigeria will sink "more and more deeply into the quagmire" that the successive governments have put us into. Finally, Achebe warns that violence begets violence, especially during elections. According to him, politicians readily solicit for the masses' votes at election times. However, the salient question Achebe poses in his book concerning elections is: "if we get killed while you are getting the vote, who, then will you serve?" This question is as priceless as it is thought provoking. Achebe leaves his readers to ponder about it. Lastly, he cites an example of Mallam Aminu Kano as being the best "leader that Nigeria never had and urges current leaders to emulate him in so many ways. Achebe's parting words are rather mournful and they are that the "new breed" of Nigerian politicians are mostly greedy and aggressive and also downright impatient for power....

### **Conclusion**

A number of issues that trouble Nigeria are well captured in Achebe's memorable book: *The Trouble with Nigeria*. Nigeria's socio-political issues are also treated rather pensively by the author who concludes that corruption is the price that all Nigerians have paid for bad leadership. For the country to move forward, the book suggests, among other things, that a sustained accountability or transparency or both must be entrenched. And any process which does not work must be discontinued or must give way to positive change. *The Trouble with Nigeria* is highly recommended to all well meaning Nigerians who seek a solution to the multifarious problems bedeviling the country. Achebe's 63 page book is highly prophetic and highly enlightening.

### **References**

- Achebe, Chinua. *The Trouble with Nigeria*. Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishing Co. Ltd, 1985.
- Azuike, Amaka. "Educating for a Culture of Peace: A Review of Eisler's & Miller's Book in Creative & Critical Writing for Peace Building in Nigeria: The Jos

*Paradigm*". Edt by Lar & Embu. Ibadan: Akin Press & Services, 2012.  
Print.

Nwosu, B.C. *The News*. Vol. 38. No. 9, 2012.

---

**References** to this paper should be made as follows: Maureen Amaka Azuike (2016), *The Comatose State of Nigerian Democracy: A Review of Achebe's the Trouble with Nigeria*. *J. of Arts and Contemporary Society*, Vol. 8, No. 1, Pp. 36 - 43.

### **Biography**

**Maureen Amaka Azuike** is a Professor of African Literature and Women's Studies, with long standing interests in Creative Writing and Feminism. She is deeply committed to the promotion of Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. She is a lecturer in the University of Jos, Plateau State.

---