Bury my bones, but keep my words: Chinua Achebe remembered

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Abstract

Purpose – The paper aims to reconsider Chinua Achebe's legacy within current debates on literary canonisation, authorship and postcolonial responsibility, advocating for a more nuanced and collective understanding of his role in African literature.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper employs close readings of Achebe's fiction and essays, and uses the Igbo metaphor ugo bere n'oji (the eagle perched on the iroko tree) to frame his cultural and symbolic significance.

Findings – Achebe's work continues to provide moral clarity, political insight and literary innovation that illuminate ongoing postcolonial challenges, affirming his enduring relevance without marginalising other African literary voices.

Research limitations/implications – Reassessing Achebe's legacy encourages a more ethically grounded and collectively inclusive approach to African literary history, shaping how authorship and influence are understood in postcolonial discourse.

Originality/value – The paper moves beyond the simplistic "father of African literature" label to propose a culturally resonant and critically engaged re-evaluation of Achebe's legacy, emphasizing both his influence and the collaborative nature of African literary production.

Keywords Chinua Achebe's legacy, Literary canonisation, Ugo bere n'oji, African literary production, Moral imagination

Paper type Research article

Introduction: Achebe as Ugo bere n'oji

> Achebe is man at the summit. Such men never die – Chidi Amuta

I begin this paper with a fundamental question: why should we reopen the conversation on Chinua Achebe by offering an encomium that appears to canonize his life and work? A related question naturally follows: why not allow Achebe's legacy to rest and shift our focus to the more urgent issues confronting the African continent, rather than revisit a subject many consider already resolved? The answer to both questions lies in the stature of the man himself. Achebe is not merely a writer but a literary icon whose reputation – much like that of Okonkwo, the protagonist of *Things Fall Apart* – rests on solid personal achievement. As Adebayo Williams aptly puts it, Achebe is "arguably Africa's most influential and most admired writer of the postcolonial epoch" (2001, p. 8). In making this claim, I am fully aware of the enduring "ancient feuds and awkward accounts to be settled" (Williams, 2001, p. 8) surrounding the contested title of "creator" or "inventor" of African literature, a label often linked to Achebe. Nii Ayikwei Parkes voices the concerns of those who view this designation as misleading and as diminishing the achievements of other eminent African writers. He argues that literature is a collective enterprise, and no single individual should be credited with having "fathered" modern African literature. Parkes' position is strengthened by Achebe's own repeated rejection of this label during his lifetime. Achebe warned that such singular

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praise risks obscuring the voices of many other African writers who have shaped the literary landscape. As he once stated:

> It's really a serious belief of mine that it's risky for anyone to lay claim to something as huge and important as African literature . . . the contribution made down the ages. I don't want to be singled out as the one behind it because there were many of us – many, many of us (Flood, 2009).

Parkes, echoing this humility, asserts that "to declare Achebe alone as the 'father of modern African literature' is to skew the realities of the world's second largest continent, a place of multiple languages and identities" (2009). Wole Soyinka, too, challenges the idea of Achebe's singularity, insisting that no one writer can claim exclusive ownership of African literary heritage. Yet, despite these valid critiques, I still find it fitting to invoke the honorific *ugo bere n'oji* – "the eagle perched on the iroko tree" – or the equally reverent phrase "creative genius and pre-eminent African literary philosopher of the 20th century" (Emenyonu and Nnolim, 2014, p. 7). In my view, these titles serve not to assert Achebe's exclusivity, but to recognise his towering presence in the academy and his global literary influence.

From a linguistic and cultural standpoint, it is vital to explore the meaning of *Ugooji* – also expressed as *ugo bere n'oji* – a term that has become inseparable from Achebe's legacy in African literary discourse. Rooted in Igbo cosmology and West African cultural symbolism, the phrase transcends mere praise to signify rare excellence. *Ugo* (eagle) represents vision, power and transcendence; *oji* (iroko) symbolizes endurance, elevation and sacredness. Together, they form a metaphor of unassailable stature. This metaphor is especially apt when applied to Achebe, whose intellectual, cultural and literary achievements place him in a league of his own. Ezenwa-Ohaeto explains the symbolism in his critical biography:

> The eagle is king of birds in the mythology of the people, and the iroko is a giant among trees [. . .]. That metaphor, applied to human beings, refers to a person whose achievements have gone beyond the stage of being destroyed by rivalry or malicious comments (1997, p. 276).

Here, greatness is not only acknowledged but shielded from triviality. The phrase becomes a cultural marker of reverence, reserved for individuals who embody integrity, creative genius and communal value. In Achebe's case, *Ugooji* affirms a legacy that is foundational, yet enduring – resilient to time and criticism. It locates Achebe within a culturally specific lexicon of excellence, one that recognizes both the magnitude and meaning of his contributions. Achebe's legacy endures because of his singular ability to blend literary craft with cultural critique and political vision. His unflinching challenge to colonial misrepresentations of Africa, coupled with his central role in shaping the African literary canon, continues to inspire new generations of writers and thinkers. The many honours he received, including global accolades and academic appointments, speak to the depth of his influence.

Suffice it to say that Chinua Achebe's extraordinary personality, masterful literary craft and unflinching critique of imperialist portrayals of Africa – alongside his foundational role in establishing what is now considered the African literary canon – continue to draw us back to him as *Ugooji*, the eagle. His enduring contributions have earned him countless accolades, honours and prestigious appointments, all of which attest to his profound impact on both African and global literature. One notable tribute came in 1990 with the symposium *Eagle on Iroko: Chinua Achebe at 60*, which captured both the metaphoric strength of his writing and his towering literary status. A decade later, a major conference marking his seventieth birthday further cemented his place in African letters. Though the title "founding father of the African novel in English" sparked debate, for many it resonated as a testament to a writer whose influence shaped the course of African literature.

Among Chinua Achebe's many admirers – at the conferences mentioned above and within broader literary circles – his status as a towering figure in African literature rests largely on his remarkable ability to use fiction as a tool for cultural reclamation and intellectual transformation. Achebe is widely celebrated as the writer who laid the foundation for modern African fiction in English, challenging colonial narratives while articulating a

distinctly African worldview. Bernth Lindfors observes that Achebe is "often . . . called the inventor of the African novel," and while Achebe himself modestly declined that title, Lindfors maintains that "modern African literature would not have flowered so rapidly and spectacularly had he not led the way" (1997, p. x). Adebayo Williams echoes this sentiment, describing Achebe as "the crystallizing exemplar of a paradigm shift in literature" (2001, p. 8). Simon Gikandi, while acknowledging the contributions of earlier writers like René Maran, Amos Tutuola, Paul Hazoumé and Sol Plaatje, argues that none matched Achebe's influence on the institutionalization of African literature. According to Gikandi, Achebe uniquely "established the terms by which African literature was produced, circulated, and interpreted," using the novel as a vehicle to reimagine African cultures outside colonial and postcolonial constraints (Reading, 3, 5). Ken Harrow reinforces this view, describing Achebe as "the single most important African writer," one whose influence extended beyond his own body of work and national context (2009, p. 156). Elleke Boehmer likewise identifies Achebe as a "dominant point of origin" and a "hyper-precursor" whose legacy continues to shape how African writers locate themselves within literary traditions (2009, p. 142). Collectively, these appraisals underscore Achebe's foundational role – not only as a writer but as a cultural architect whose legacy continues to define the field of African literature.

Achebe's many eulogists have echoed these tributes, affirming his reputation as a "renowned raconteur" (Ogbaa, 1999, p. xvii) and as the widely acknowledged "father of modern African literature" – a distinction many writers may seek, but few truly earn. This perspective is compellingly advanced by Kwaku Larbi Korang in his essay "Homage to a Modern Literary Father," one of the most perceptive reflections on Achebe's symbolic stature. Korang argues that Achebe is uniquely deserving of this paternal status because "none of his literary precursors was able to shape the wide-ranging consensus that, by his persuasive example, [Achebe] did" (2011, p. vii). For Korang, the widespread reverence for Achebe signals a deeper consensus "about what, how, and from what perspective(s) modern continental literary writing ought to represent in order to be representatively 'African'" (2011, p. vii). While earlier African writers made significant contributions, Korang contends they offered instances of "singularly remarkable authorship" without leaving behind a replicable model. Achebe, by contrast, provided a paradigmatic example – one that offered both a foundation and a blueprint for the emergence of a continental literary tradition: "What they did not enduringly provide was a modular example in whose repetition – and in whose revision-in-repetition – a continental literary tradition would found itself, and locate and name its essence and universality as '*African* literature'" (2011, p. vii; original emphasis).

Korang's insights resonate with the widely held view that Achebe occupies a singular place in African literary history. Even if Achebe had written only *Things Fall Apart*, that novel alone would have cemented his reputation. Its profound resonance across cultures and generations has made it one of the most influential works in modern African literature. By the late 1990s, *Things Fall Apart* had become so iconic that its sales surpassed the combined total of all 300 titles in Heinemann's African Writers Series (Lindfors, 1997, p. ix). This level of acclaim explains the novel's enduring status as a cornerstone of African literature and the widespread recognition of Achebe as a literary titan – often likened to Shakespeare in terms of canonical significance.

A close reading of Achebe's work

Achebe's literary legacy extends beyond *Things Fall Apart*. His critical essays provide essential frameworks for understanding African poetics, aesthetics and intellectual traditions. As Emenyonu and Nnolim note, his nonfiction writing offers indispensable tools "for the definitions and discourse of African poetics, critical standards and aesthetics" (2014, p. 3). In these essays, Achebe confronts the longstanding Western portrayal of Africa as "a foil of Europe, a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar, in comparison with which Europe's own state of spiritual Grace will be manifest" ("An Image" 2013, p. 112). Such

representations, he argues, distort African cultures and strip the continent of its dignity in the global literary imagination.

Achebe's African Trilogy – *Things Fall Apart*, *No Longer at Ease* and *Arrow of God* – directly challenges these dehumanising depictions, offering instead a rich, complex and historically grounded portrayal of African societies. Through these works, Achebe rejects the caricatures found in canonical Western texts like Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* and Edgar Rice Burroughs' *Tarzan*. Yet Achebe does not idealise African cultures. His commitment to realism includes an unflinching recognition of internal flaws. In *Hopes and Impediments*, he asserts, "We do have our own sins and blasphemies recorded against our names" (1989, p. 43), emphasizing the need for honest self-assessment. He further urges Africans to take ownership of their challenges: "assume responsibility for [their] problems and [their] situation in the world and resist the temptation to blame other people" (1989, p. 68). For Achebe, a truly representative African literature must be grounded in both self-critique and historical consciousness.

Achebe's "informed vision and artistic integrity" (Emenyonu and Nnolim, 2014, p. 2) embody a mode of critical realism that has come to define much of contemporary African writing. This approach resists nostalgia and romanticism, presenting the African past and present with honesty and nuance. Omafume Onoge describes this literary stance as one that acknowledges both "the virtues and weaknesses" of African societies while maintaining their dignity (1985, p. 35). Achebe's unwavering dedication to this balanced portrayal solidified his role as a cultural critic, activist and nationalist – one who believed literature should pursue truth, even when it is difficult. His work continues to inspire writers and readers to seek a fuller, more complex understanding of African realities.

In a Paris Review interview with Jerome Brooks, Achebe articulated the importance of narrative self-determination through a proverb: "Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter." He reiterated this to Katie Bacon, asserting that "those who have been written about [by the West] should also participate in the making of these stories" (2000). For Achebe, reclaiming one's narrative is essential to resisting distortion. This vision is clearly outlined in his essay "The Novelist as Teacher," where he states his mission: "to help my society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement" (*Hopes* 1989, p. 44). Achebe believed literature could serve as a form of cultural re-education and moral regeneration. As he declared, "I cannot expect to be excused from the task of re-education and regeneration that must be done" (1989, p. 45). These twin goals – re-education and regeneration – define Achebe's social and literary mission. He sought to show that Africa's past, despite its imperfections, was not "one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans, acting on God's behalf, delivered them" (1989, p. 45). He vigorously opposed Western portrayals that denied African societies their complexity and dignity. As he told Lindfors, "Africa was not a vacuum before the coming of Europe . . . culture was not brought to Africa by the white world" (blurb). In "The Role of the Writer in a New Nation," Achebe reaffirms this mission, insisting:

> African people did not hear of culture for the first time from the Europeans; [. . .] their societies were not mindless but had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty, and they had poetry and, above all, they had dignity. It is this dignity that many African people all but lost during the colonial period and it is this that they must now regain. (1973, p. 8)

Achebe's commitment to presenting the full humanity of African societies is especially evident in *Things Fall Apart*. He does not gloss over the darker aspects of Igbo culture; rather, he portrays them with candour and complexity. The novel presents both admirable customs and troubling practices, such as the killing of twins and the marginalization of osu outcasts. In doing so, Achebe challenges the romanticized view that Africa was a utopia before colonization. Literary critic Kalu Ogbaa notes that Achebe's narrative "stands in sharp contrast to the erroneous but popular beliefs of some Africans that Africa was an Edenic continent until the white men came to colonize it" (1999, p. 2). He praises *Things Fall Apart* for offering "an

objective evaluation of the folkways that constitute Igbo life, culture, and civilization" (2), showing how certain social and religious practices – like the exclusion of osu or the abandonment of sick individuals – created internal weaknesses that facilitated colonial intrusion.

Ultimately, Achebe's critical realism – especially in Things Fall Apart and his other historical novels – provides a clear-eyed view of African societies. Onoge's description of this literary approach captures Achebe's ethos: the goal is not escapism or romanticism, but an honest portrayal that preserves dignity while engaging critically with the past (1985, p. 35). Through this method, Achebe established himself not only as a literary pioneer but also as a moral voice – one who challenged Africans to take ownership of their history, confront uncomfortable truths and imagine a future grounded in authenticity and intellectual courage.

Chinua Achebe was deeply aware that the pursuit of truth – objective and honest – was both a demanding and indispensable task. In "The Role of the Writer in a New Nation," he recognizes the temptation for writers to idealize the past, "to extol its good points and pretend that the bad ones never existed" (1973, p. 9). Yet Achebe resists such romanticization, warning against portraying the African past as "one long, technicolour idyll," insisting instead that, like any other history, it had both "its good as well as its bad side" (1973, p. 9). This commitment to a truthful and balanced engagement with history defines his later works, such as *A Man of the People*, *Anthills of the Savannah* and numerous essays on literature, politics and colonial legacies [1]. In these texts, Achebe moves beyond the earlier postcolonial imperative of "writing back to the centre." Rather than focusing solely on countering colonial misrepresentations, he turns his gaze inward, critically examining the internal failures and contradictions of the post–independence African state. This shift is clearly articulated in "The Novelist as Teacher," where he argues that Africans must acknowledge their own complicity: "we do have our own sins and blasphemies recorded against our names" (1989, p. 43). While he does not dismiss historical injustices, Achebe insists that "it is too late in the day to get worked up about it or to blame others [. . .]. *What we need to do is to look back and try and find out where we went wrong, where the rain began to beat us*" (1989, p. 43, emphasis added). A similar message is conveyed in "Colonialist Criticism," where he stresses the importance of self-responsibility: "The time has come when we must assume responsibility for our problems and our situation in the world and resist the temptation to blame other people" (1989, p. 68). For Achebe, the path to societal renewal requires introspection and the cultivation of civic and personal responsibility. He urges Africans to look inward not simply to critique but to transform their societies. This ethos is particularly evident in *The Trouble with Nigeria*, where Achebe writes, "It is the duty of enlightened citizens to lead the way . . . If this conscious effort is not made, good leaders, like good money, will be driven out by the bad" (1983, pp. 1–2). In his view, ethical leadership and engaged citizenship are not optional – they are the bedrock of a just and forward-looking society.

Yet Achebe's literary and moral vision extends beyond recovering African cultural identity or advancing a realist aesthetic. Like many of his contemporaries, he believed that the writer bore a serious moral and ideological responsibility. Echoing Frantz Fanon's notion of the artist as an awakener of the people, Achebe held that literature must engage with the pressing moral, political and economic challenges of its time. For him, storytelling was a tool of education and transformation. Writers, he believed, were morally obliged to confront the "gods of evil" – corruption, inequality, injustice – and to speak out against silence and complicity. Though reform is a collective responsibility, Achebe was clear that without radical action from those in power, no meaningful change could occur. As he argues in *The Trouble with Nigeria*, transformation requires "a radical programme of social and economic re-organization from the chief executive at the top" (1983, p. 1). Leadership must rise to "the challenge of personal example," or risk condemnation by history for betrayal and moral failure (1983, 1, 3). These urgent reflections reveal Achebe's prescient understanding of the postcolonial condition and his unflinching ethical clarity. Achebe viewed many African leaders as lacking this moral courage, driven instead by personal gain rather than the common good. In *The Trouble with Nigeria*, he condemns such self-serving leadership in stark terms:

> The fear that should nightly haunt our leaders (but does not) is that they may already have betrayed irretrievably Nigeria's high destiny. The countless billions that a generous Providence poured into our national coffers in the last ten tears [. . .] would have been enough to launch this nation into the middle-rank of developed nations and transformed the lives of the poor and needy. But what have we done with it? *Stolen and salted away by people in power and their accomplices*. (1983, pp. 2–3; my emphasis)

This critique of corrupt elites who hoard wealth and betray public trust is a recurring theme in Achebe's fiction, especially in *No Longer at Ease*, *A Man of the People* and *Anthills of the Savannah*. In an interview with Tony Hall, Achebe stressed that *A Man of the People* was no accident but the beginning of a new literary phase – a deliberate critique of what postcolonial Africa had become. He later described it as an indictment of a continent descending into "a cesspool of corruption and misrule" (Heywood, 1975, p. 82). These remarks highlight a pivotal shift in Achebe's literary focus – from responding to colonial narratives to exposing the internal failures of African leadership.

Achebe's remarks underscore a critical shift in his literary focus – from responding to colonial misrepresentations to interrogating the internal failures of postcolonial African leadership, particularly within the Nigerian political context. This transition reflects a broader concern with the continent's internal dysfunctions and the betrayal of the promise of independence. As Khaiminthang observes, *A Man of the People*, set in an unnamed post–independence African country in the 1960s, "examines the hopeless situation of an African country in its attempt to run self-government after decades of colonial subjugation" (103). This sense of disillusionment is further echoed in *Anthills of the Savannah*, where Ikem laments that the government's primary failure lies in its inability to reconnect with "the bruised heart that throbs painfully at the core of the nation's being" (1987, p. 141). Achebe thus repositions the African writer as a critic of internal decay and a moral voice within the postcolonial condition. Such reflections reveal Achebe's deepening preoccupation with the moral and political crises afflicting postcolonial African states, and his insistence on literature's role in confronting those crises.

Achebe situates his critique at the heart of what he describes as a crisis in the soul of the postcolonial African state – a crisis defined by systemic corruption and the moral failures of the ruling elite. In *A Man of the People*, this crisis is embodied in the character of Chief the Honourable M.A. Nanga. Once a vocal advocate during the independence struggle, Micah Nanga is revealed to have abandoned the ideals he once championed. As the narrator notes, before entering politics, Nanga was among those who sought to "tear down the veils behind which truth had [hidden]," only to later "find the [same] veils useful" once in power (Armah, 1988, p. 92). This concern is powerfully rendered in *A Man of the People*, where Achebe captures the disillusionment of a generation betrayed by its own leaders. The novel's protagonist, Chief the Honourable M.A. Nanga, once a vocal advocate of independence, becomes the embodiment of political decadence. Before entering politics, he had sought to "tear down the veils behind which truth had [hidden]," but once in power, he "found the [same] veils useful" (Armah, 1988, p. 92). Initially admired by the narrator, Odili Samalu, Nanga's greed and cynicism soon become apparent. Odili's growing disillusionment mirrors Achebe's broader critique of the betrayal of independence. Exploiting the trust of his constituents, Nanga transforms from "the most approachable politician in the country" (1988, p. 1) into a figure of unchecked ambition and corruption, driven by personal enrichment rather than public service. Achebe illustrates how such political decadence fosters widespread disillusionment, particularly through the experience of Odili Samalu, the novel's narrator. Initially respectful of Nanga, Odili becomes disenchanted after moving in with him in the capital and witnessing first-hand the excesses and moral decay of his former mentor. This narrative arc underscores Achebe's broader concern with the betrayal of post–independence ideals and the complicity of the political elite in perpetuating the very structures of inequality and exploitation they once opposed:

> We ignore man's basic nature if we say, as some critics do, that because a man like Nanga has risen overnight from poverty and insignificance to his present opulence, he could be persuaded without much trouble to give it up again and return to his original state.

> A man who has just come in from the rain and dried his body and put on dry clothes is more reluctant to go out again than another who has been indoors the whole time. The trouble with our new nation [. . .] was that none of us had been indoors long enough to be able to say 'To hell with it.' We had all been in the rain together until yesterday. Then a handful of us – the smart and the lucky and hardly ever the best – had scrambled for the one shelter our former rulers left, and had taken it over and barricaded themselves in. (1988, p. 37)

Through Odili's narration, Achebe critiques the illusion that those who have risen rapidly from poverty to power – like Chief Nanga – can easily be convinced to relinquish their privileged positions. To assume that such individuals could simply give up their wealth and return to their former lives is, as Odili puts it, to ignore "man's basic nature." Achebe sharpens this point with the vivid metaphor of a man who has just come in from the rain, dried himself off and put on clean, dry clothes: such a man is far more reluctant to step back into the downpour than someone who never left the comfort of the indoors. This figure of speech serves Achebe's broader vision: to indict the moral failure of post–independence leadership in Africa. The leaders are not the best among the people, but those most adept at seizing opportunity. Their legitimacy is thus hollow, rooted not in service or sacrifice but in greed and a fear of returning to the very hardship they once shared with the masses. By casting their rise as both accidental and opportunistic, Achebe not only critiques individual corruption but exposes the systemic failures of a newly independent nation that, in inheriting colonial structures, reproduces the same logic of exploitation and exclusion.

Achebe's insight gains further depth when the novel is read alongside his earlier short story, "The Voter." In the narrative context of Nigeria as portrayed in the story, Achebe critiques the subtle dynamics of bribery and blackmail among the constituents of Umuofia. In the story, Chief the Honourable Marcus Ibe is described as a "not too successful mission school teacher" (1972, p. 10) who abandons his teaching career to pursue a parliamentary seat. Ibe wins the election and becomes Umuofia's Member of Parliament and later, Minister of Culture. Like Chief Nanga in *A Man of the People*, Ibe is initially adored by his constituents but ultimately fails to deliver on his promises. As elections recur, Ibe grows increasingly alienated from the people and resorts to bribery to secure their votes. The story reveals a community that not only becomes accustomed to its parliamentarian's underhanded tactics but also develops an appetite for petty handouts from Ibe and other politicians who descend upon Umuofia to canvass for votes. When Ibe's campaign assistant, Rufus Okeke, offers them small sums of "shining shillings," a group of elders retorts that their illustrious son ought to do better than offering a mere two shillings – especially when his rival is distributing five-pound red notes, thereby underscoring the normalisation of corruption and the commodification of political loyalty:

> We shall, every one of us, drop his paper for Marcus. Who would leave an ozo feast and go to a poor ritual meal? Tell Marcus he has our papers, and our wives' papers, too. But what we say is that two shillings is shameful [. . .]. Yes, two shillings is too shameful. If Marcus were a poor man – which our ancestors forbid – I should be the first to give my paper free, as I did before. But today Marcus is a great man and does his things like a great man. We did not ask him for money yesterday; we shall not ask him tomorrow. *But today is our day; we have climbed the iroko tree today and would be foolish not to take down all the firewood we need* (1972, pp. 11–12; my emphasis).

This passage deploys rich figures of speech to expose and critique the moral decay of post–independence African governance. For example, the euphemism "we have climbed the iroko tree today and would be foolish not to take down all the firewood we need" disguises opportunism and extortion as prudent resourcefulness. In traditional Igbo cosmology, the iroko tree is sacred, often associated with wisdom and ancestral reverence. Achebe ironically appropriates this cultural symbolism to highlight how even sacred symbols are repurposed to legitimise corruption. By likening bribery to the practical act of gathering firewood, a necessity for daily survival, the speaker masks venality as a communal right and duty. This rhetorical sleight of hand reflects how deeply normalised and rationalised corrupt practices have become within the postcolonial polity – so much so that they are framed not as moral

failings but as clever acts of self-preservation. Further irony surfaces in the statement: "if Marcus were a poor man – which our ancestors forbid – I should be the first to give my paper free, as I did before." Here, the speaker manipulates ancestral authority to mask personal greed. The invocation of "our ancestors" not only feigns cultural deference but also functions as a rhetorical shield for extortion. What is presented as a gesture of loyalty to tradition is, in fact, a justification for transactional politics, where access to rights and participation depends on payment to the powerful. Achebe exposes how traditional idioms and communal values are cynically co-opted to rationalize elite entitlement and political clientelism.

This subtle but scathing critique echoes Achebe's more direct commentary in *The Trouble with Nigeria*, where he insists that "the trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership" (1983, p. 1). There, Achebe calls for the urgent moral renewal of political life, demanding that leaders not only be honest but also be "seen to take" decisive action against corruption (1983, p. 43). The contrast between such ideals and the sordid pragmatism of the characters in *Girls at War* reveals the depth of Achebe's pessimism regarding post–independence African governance. The ironic detachment in the story mirrors the tone of weary disenchantment that pervades much of his later fiction and essays. Through metaphor, euphemism and irony, Achebe dramatizes a political culture in which exploitation masquerades as wisdom, and where the language of tradition is emptied of its ethical content and redeployed in service of the very moral collapse it once sought to prevent.

Achebe's work can be compellingly read as apocalyptic in tone – not in the traditional religious sense of end-times prophecy, but in the secular, moral and political sense of revelation, judgment and ethical awakening. In the construction offered by Russell, apocalyptic writing is characterised by "divine disclosure, transcendental reality, and final redemption" (1993, pp. 34–35). While Achebe does not claim divine or prophetic authority, his writing operates in a similar register of urgent moral disclosure. His literary and nonfiction works function as instruments of revelation, exposing systemic injustice and the deep ethical crises at the heart of postcolonial African societies.

In *There Was a Country*, for example, Achebe asserts that the role of the artist is not to serve power but to confront it – "to always take sides," he writes, "to be on the side of the people" and to uphold truth as a liberating force (2012, pp. 58–59). This insistence on moral clarity and the transformative potential of truth echoes the apocalyptic imperative: to unveil the hidden structures of oppression and to summon a radical reorientation of values. Achebe's apocalyptic voice is not merely diagnostic but visionary – he warns of collapse, but also gestures toward renewal, grounded in ethical accountability and the reclamation of human dignity. His critiques of the post-colonial African state in *The Trouble with Nigeria*, *A Man of the People*, *Anthills of the Savannah* and *There Was a Country* are trenchant condemnations of political corruption, moral decay, and the betrayal of post–independence hopes. Yet they also carry a revelatory weight – each work pierces the surface of political rhetoric to expose a deeper moral crisis. The apocalyptic in Achebe's work thus lies in this dual function: to disclose and to demand. His vision is not narrowly nationalistic; it transcends the borders of Nigeria to speak to the postcolonial African condition more broadly, where the unfulfilled promises of independence have given way to a cycle of authoritarianism, inequality and disillusionment. In this context, Achebe's writing emerges not only as literature but as a form of ethical prophecy – calling readers to confront uncomfortable truths and to imagine the possibility of redemption, however fragile, through collective moral reckoning.

Conclusion

Having outlined the central themes that animate Chinua Achebe's literary corpus, it is clear that he occupies a singular place in the canon of African literary and intellectual history. Achebe is widely celebrated for his unwavering engagement with the socio-political realities of his time, and for his masterful use of fiction as a vehicle for truth-telling. His willingness to confront the failures of postcolonial leadership – often at great personal and professional risk –

underscores his deep commitment to moral clarity and artistic responsibility. Crucially, Achebe's ethical vision was not confined to the page. He lived the values he espoused in his writing, most notably through his principled rejection of national honours from successive Nigerian governments, in protest against corruption, injustice and the moral decay of the state. In doing so, Achebe modelled a rare kind of intellectual courage: one that refused complicity and insisted on accountability. He did not merely describe the erosion of Nigeria's political and cultural fabric – he resisted it. Achebe thus stands as an enduring symbol of integrity and critical consciousness. As Emenyonu and Nnolim rightly observe, he is "a legend, [. . .] a man of all seasons, a writer of all time," whose work resonates across generations and genres, encompassing fiction, essays, memoir and cultural commentary (2014, p. 3). This paper has sought to illuminate the ways in which Achebe's life and work cohere into a powerful legacy of resistance, self-reflection and cultural affirmation.

To remember Achebe, then, is not to enshrine him as an unassailable figure or to monopolise the narrative of African literature in his name. Rather, it is to honour the intellectual humility, visionary critique and moral imagination that continue to make his work indispensable. Achebe's voice remains a vital compass for navigating the complexities of African cultural and political life. Engaging with his legacy means engaging with the very soul of African literary modernity – an act of remembrance that affirms the eagle's place above the iroko, ever vigilant, ever soaring.

About the author

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Note

1. The essays in question here include: *Morning Yet on Creation Day: Essays* (1975), *The Trouble with Nigeria* (1983) *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays* (1989), *Home and Exile* (2000) and his recent apocalyptic valedictory memoir titled *There was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra* (2012).

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