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Instrumentalising Terror for Political Hegemony: Analysis of Chinua Achebe's *There Was a Country*

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Abstract:
Failure to restore legitimate authority in the postcolonial state is one of Africa's most distressing political shortfalls. The continent's political legitimacy crisis has culminated in collapsed or failed states. Several scholars have weighed in on this discussion, specifically the need for the restoration of legitimate authority to address the disintegration of credible claims to the exercise of power. In the recent past, the political situation has been grave during periods of transition because crises of legitimacy are often crises of change. In many instances, terror is used to tame dissenting voices and facilitate political dominance. Literary writers from the region have represented this sad state of affairs, and Chinua Achebe is one of them. The study is situated in this context. It aims to investigate the representation of terror as an instrument of political hegemony in Achebe's There Was a Country. This study benefits from Marxist literary theory, particularly the ideas of Tyson (2006) and Prychitko (2002). This study concludes that Achebe employs a new story-telling strategy to demonstrate that alienation and separation deprive individuals and groups of their potential to plan and control their collective fate in a hegemonic political structure. To irrigate commoditisation, obsession with a market-based society, and massage capitalistic egos, a climate of fear is created. The results of this study will serve as key reference points for literary scholars with a bias on the instrumentation of terror for political dominance.

Keywords: *Intrumentalisation, terror, commoditisation, hegemony, capitalism, alienation, separation*

1. Introduction

Chinua Achebe is one of the most prominent African writers. He is regarded as the 'Father of African Literature' (Abrams, 2013). Though he has experimented with nearly all genres of literature: poetry, prose fiction, and essays, he is distinguished for prose writing, particularly the novel form. His novels include *Things Fall Apart, Arrow of God, No Longer at Ease, A Man of the People* and *Anthills of the Savannah*. Whereas Achebe has written many essays, including *The Education of a British-Protected Child, The Trouble with Nigeria, Hopes and Impediments, Morning Yet on Creation Day* and *Home and Exile*, *There Was a Country* stands out for its unique blend of history, memory, poetry and first-hand observation. It is considered a new genre of literature as it is a rare amalgam of multiple formal techniques. This autobiographical essay can be critiqued from varied theoretical standpoints. For this study, we undertake a Marxist literary reading. We argue that terror – a climate or a state of intense and overwhelming fear, violence and, in some instances, threat of violence – is used to facilitate political dominance.

2. Representation of Terror as an Instrument of Political Hegemony in Achebe's *There Was a Country*

Achebe's *There Was a Country* lends itself well to Marxist literary criticism. Many modern theories of literature spring from Marxism and critical overlaps are bound to occur. The following Marxist concepts underpin this study: commoditisation, economic determinism, alienation, separation, and ideology. The first prime minister of Nigeria is portrayed in this autobiographical work as a product of an ethnicised socio-political and economic ideology. Sir Ahmadu Bello, the Sardauna of Sokoto and the founder of the Northern People's Congress (NPC) inspires economic fear to rally his Northern counterparts behind his political aspirations. To slay the two political hegemons in the Northern part of Nigeria – Azizikwe and Awololo, who led the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) and Action Group, respectively – and galvanise the support of Southerners, Bello weaponises fear. Fearmongering is, in this regard, instrumentalised to consolidate political support. While his superstructural strategy does not pass for intimidation or coercion, the Northerners are compelled to vote for him to protect what he ideologically presents as their 'hegemonic interests.' Besides

being called upon to name the first prime minister, his party wins the majority of seats in the post-independence parliament. Achebe writes:

[He] was able to control northern Nigeria politically by feeding on the fears of the ruling emirs and a small elite group of Western-educated northerners. His ever-effective mantra was that to protect the mainly feudal North's hegemonic interests; it was critical to forming a political party capable of resisting the growing power of Southern politicians. (Achebe, 2012, p. 46)

Economic forces determine, shape and define the socio-political motivations in post-colonial Nigeria. In the words of Marx, '… material life conditions the [religious] and intellectual life process in general' (Marx, 2009). The tragedy of such economic determinism is that the minorities of the Niger Delta, Mid-West and the Middle Best regions of Nigeria have to 'fit into the tripod of the largest ethnic groups [such as] Hausa/ Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo' (p. 47). To attain any significant political results, they have to subsume their ethnic ambitions within the larger tribal alliances. The superstructural architecture of this society makes it difficult for them to take charge of their individual and collective destinies (Prychitko, 2002). Besides, political agents commit violent or destructive acts to intimidate them into submission.

Achebe reveals that the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised is anchored on commodification. The colonial regimes do not seem to be concerned about the welfare of African communities; rather, they dominate them for financial benefit. The British, Achebe discloses, initially handed out 'stiff jail terms for 'sedition' to the disturbers of peace' to intimidate them into accepting their demands. It was their strategy for resisting any agitations for independence. To quell inter-ethnic tensions and posturing, they divide the country into three regions, 'Northern, Eastern and Western Regions, with their own respective houses of assembly to contain the rising threat' of a full-blown political resistance, an ideological or 'political ploy to appease the Northerners and the Westerners who wanted their traditional rulers to play a greater role in the Nigerian affairs' (p. 46). They subordinate the native population to quench their insatiable appetite for new sources of raw materials from which they can make goods and keep their industries running. They understood the value of their African colonies and 'the natural resources they possessed – in Nigeria's case, oil, coal, gold, tin, columbite, cocoa, palm oil, groundnuts and rubber, as well as the immense human resources and intellectual capital' (p. 46). At the dawn of World War II, these colonies, Achebe notes, 'became increasingly important to Great Britain's war effort by providing a steady stream of revenue from the export of agricultural products…' (p. 44). Tyson makes a similar observation in *Critical Theory Today*, where he contends:

Capitalism's constant need for new markets in which to sell goods and for new sources of raw materials from which to make goods is also responsible for the spread of imperialism: the military, economic, and/or cultural domination of one nation by another for the financial benefit of the dominating nation with little or no concern for the welfare of the dominated. … When the imperialist nation establishes communities in an 'underdeveloped' country, those communities are called colonies, as were the American Colonies before the American Revolution, and it uses those colonies to extend its economic interests. The motive of all imperialist endeavour, no matter what positive influence the conquering nation claims to have on the local population, is an economic gain for the 'mother country.' (Tyson, 2006, p. 63)

The post-independence leaders in Africa deployed colonial strategies to keep their grip on power. In what is similar to the Orwellian satire of the pigs' blind apemanship of human civilisation – 'all walking on their hind legs' and placing themselves above those who walk on four legs (Orwell, 2009, p. 77) – the black leaders rely on colonial manipulation to 'stay in power.' Aside from appealing to tribal sentiments, they amass public wealth, blatantly rig elections, outrageously stage-manage national census, and corrupt the justice system to secure pre-determined judgements. Postcolonial leaders, like Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, the prime minister of Nigeria, who had been built into a great statesman by the Western world, are political puppets of former imperialists. Achebe describes them metaphorically as 'pawns of foreign business interests' (p. 51) and 'conservative elements in the country that played no real part in the struggle for independence' (p. 52). To create a climate of fear, stifle literary creativity and gag voices that are antithetical to their political excesses, they arrest writers on trumped-up charges. When violence erupts after an unbelievable election swindle, as a result of the anger and frustrations of the Western Nigerians, Soyinka is charged with holding up the Ibadan radio station and removing the premier's taped speech and the travelling theatre of Hubert Ogunde and his many wives is declared unlawful for staging a play clearly directed at the crooked premier of Western Nigeria' (p. 52). This political environment is hostile to literary writers as it hardly tolerates dissenting views. The desire to take sides with the powerless and the oppressed puts the writer at loggerheads with the powers that be. The liberation of African countries from colonial dominion ushered in a new form of colonialism. Nigeria's independence 'was totally without content' as it was given, in Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe's words, 'on a platter of gold' (p. 52).

Political coups are also motivated by economic factors. The plotters instrumentalise violence to force governments out of power. That they become as rudderless as the governments they overthrow is not surprising. Their motivation is to establish a new capitalistic class. It is a case of two hegemons competing over the resources of a country. The winner then temporarily amasses wealth and terrorises the country to hold onto power, and a new group of oligarchs is planning to depose them. This is the greatest tragedy of post-independence African societies. The exit of the white man does not make things any better for African countries. They capitalise on their economic influence to dictate political affairs in their former colonies. They continue to influence these nations because those who are in power do seem to understand the true meaning of revolution. Their political reigns have to be legitimised by the former imperialists. The 1966 coup d'état ushers in a reign of terror. Heavy military presence in Lagos ignites fear. Soldiers cordon off media outlets in the country to control the flow of information. Achebe recalls that they 'stopped [him] and interrogated [him]' for a long time at the Broadcasting House. The suspicion that this dethronement engendered creates anxiety in the country. 'Soldiers in military vehicles were seen being deployed throughout the city, and roadblocks with barbed wire were being erected everywhere.'

Two Prime ministers – Bello, the most powerful of the premiers and Akintola, the premier of Western Nigeria – are killed. The killing, imprisonment or detainment of leaders during the coup thrusts 'Nigeria into a state of shock for a long time' (Achebe, 2012, p. 64). A series of crises 'threatened to split the country at its seams.' The tribal card is used by the political class to manipulate their thoughts. Their political choices are conditioned by ideological ploys.

The narrative that the coup was 'a sinister plot by the ambitious Igbo of the East to seize control of Nigeria' gained currency. This was part of the gossip, innuendos and fabricated accounts that magnified the political confusion in Nigeria after the coup. Propaganda became a political strategy for hoodwinking the ignorant masses and heightening ethnic tensions in the country for the benefit of the bourgeoisie. Using this tribal card, the Easterners become the target of both random and organised attacks. Lust for revenge and economic power are shrouded in political ideologies. The fact that 'virtually every sector – politics, education, commerce and the arts' (Achebe, 2012, pp. 66-7) posed a significant threat to other regions and the neocolonisers. The British, who still had economic interests in Nigeria, played a part in this political revenge mission as they, too, felt that the Igbo had given them so many headaches and were responsible for their exit from the Nigerian political scene. As open targets for political attacks and 'scapegoats for the failings and grievances of colonial and post-independence Nigeria' (p. 67), it was becoming increasingly difficult to find safe havens. Achebe observes:

In a country in which tribalism was endemic, the rumour of an 'Igbo coup' began to find acceptance. Before long, many people had been persuaded that their spontaneous jubilation in January had been a mistake. A Nigerian poet who had dedicated a new book 'to the heroes of January 1966' had second thoughts after the countercoup of July, and he sent a frantic cable to his publishers to remove the dedication. … One found some ethnic or religious element supporting whatever one was trying to make sense of. This angle grew stronger and stronger as the days passed, mainly because the state of confusion was not really dispelled satisfactorily by the authorities. (Achebe, 2012, p. 66)

Desperate for hegemonic control, elements in power used soldiers to commit a number of heinous crimes against the Igbo community. They are arrested and summarily executed by military officers. Out of fear, victims, particularly in the North, are forced to flee the pogroms. The chairman of the Nigerian Coal Corporation, Dr. Okechukwu Ikejiani, becomes the target of political hoodlums. He, like other Igbos who hold strategic positions in government, is forced to camouflage as a woman to escape the grasp of these thugs. The narrator is not spared; his home and the homes of other Igbos who lived in Lagos are raided by soldiers. He narrowly escapes death as soldiers raid Milverton Street, his old house, in search of him. Military leaders suspected he had a hand in the January coup as he had predicted in *A Man of the People*. Achebe says, '… it happened that I had just written *A Man of the People*, which forecast a military coup that overthrows a corrupt civilian government. Clearly, a case of fact imitating fiction and nothing else, but some military leaders believed that I must have had something to do with the coup and wanted to bring me in for questioning' (p. 67). Achebe, out of fear, is forced to leave his Turnbull Roadhouse, which is located in 'Ikoyi, a nice section of the town overlooking the lagoon,' a painful decision to secure the lives of his family members. He finds refuge in Frank Cawson's house. Surveillance of media outlets is a strategy for suppressing anti-regime sentiments. Soft targets of political assassination and arbitrary arrests have to tread carefully; they have to take precautionary steps to enhance their safety. In a 'tense, anxiety-plagued' political environment, dissenters fear for their lives. Hoping that things would soon get better, they seek solace in temporary hideouts. What is particularly worrying in this political atmosphere is that the intellectual foundation of this society is equally contaminated by these tribal sentiments. Whereas Achebe hoped that Nigerian intellectuals would condemn social injustice and come to his defence, many of them distanced them from political discussions. This tribal ideology, it seems, becomes the new definition of nearly all social relations. When Achebe's hideout is finally discovered, he recalls:

As many of us packed our belongings to return east, some of the people we had lived with for years, some for decades, jeered and said, 'Let them [Igbo] go; food will be cheaper in Lagos.' That kind of experience is very powerful. It is something I could not possibly forget. I realised suddenly that I had been living in a strange place. There were more and more reports of massacres, not only in the North but also in the West and in Lagos. People were hounded out of their homes, as we were in Lagos, and returned to the East. (Achebe, 2012, p. 68)

Perhaps it is this reflection that qualifies the title of this literary text. 'There was a country' – groups of people exhibiting different cultural traits forced to live together in a colonially defined geography – and not a nation. Material interests of the colonisers guided the delimitations in Africa. These colonial boundaries did not cater for the interests of African communities. British intellectuals, Achebe reveals, fanned 'hot-blooded anger.' Foreign elements infiltrate and contaminate the African intelligentsia to facilitate hegemonic control. Some Northern elements in places like Ahmadu Bello University derived their so-called radical intellectual positions from colonial intellectuals. Using the words of Kenneth Onwuka Dike, Achebe observes that 'intellectuals were becoming the worst peddlers of tribalism' (p. 77). This illustration demonstrates that the outcome of this politically expedient process was the creation of fragmented entities. Persons who live within these borders do not feel fully attached to the philosophies of black hegemons. They do not feel duty-bound to commit themselves to the collective aspirations of their countries. That they often retreat to their tribal cocoons whenever matters of national interest are canvassed can be understood in this context. They align themselves more with ethnic visions rather than the greater national good. The colonial powers did not appreciate the complexities of diverse cultural experiences. An incompetent ruling class with a poor grasp of this colonial history will find it difficult to appreciate and grapple with the ethnic and political complexity of post-independence African countries. 'Stunted by ineptitude [and] distracted by power games and the pursuit of material comforts,' this 'clique [is] unwilling, if not incapable of saving our fledgling new nations.' Achebe suggests that this is the reason African countries are politically unstable. 'Aided by a few in the expatriate population from outside Nigeria, who easily influenced the mostly self-satisfied and docile Northern leadership to activate a weapon that has been used repeatedly in Nigeria's short history – a fringe element known as 'area boys' or the 'rent-a-crowd types' – to attack Igbo in an orgy of blood' (Achebe, 2012, p. 69).

Unable to deal with political complexities effectively, these leaders resort to the use of terror. During the civil war in Nigeria, as demonstrated in Achebe's autobiographical work, terror was used as an instrument of political hegemony. In what seems like an ethnic cleansing exercise, persons from the Igbo community are either killed or forced to flee Lagos, the centre of economic determinism. Achebe's wife, Christie and the children were literally smuggled out of Lagos. She, the children and other refugees were placed in an open section of a cargo ship. Achebe vividly describes this harrowing experience as recollected by Christie. 'People were disappearing right and left … killings had reached the peak figure of hundreds a week. … Relatives were sending messages … begging their loved ones in Lagos to return… The highways were full of police roadblocks' and 'mobs were hunting down and killing innocent civilians in many parts, especially in the North because the federal government sat by and let it happen' (pp. 70-71). The hegemons are willing to use every medium to sustain power. This class struggle, which is superficially projected as a tribal clash, is driven by the desire for capital control.

In a daringly objective account of this ugly period in Nigeria's history, he does not spare the Igbo community. He acknowledges that individual interest in the white man's knowledge gave them an edge over other communities. They 'absorbed Western education as readily as they responded to urbanisation'; consequently, they were cast as an assertive group that unfairly dominated almost every sector of Nigerian society.' While this reflected the culture of educational excellence imbibed from the colonial regime, the net effect of this dominance significantly marginalised other parts of the Nigerian society economically. According to the 1966 publication of *The Nigerian Situation: Facts and Background*, forty-five percent (45%) of managers within public service were Igbo 'and it [was] threatening to reach 60 percent by 1968. Moreover, regrettably though [the] North's future contribution' was credited with only 10 percent of the existing posts' (Achebe, 2012, p. 77). This was a particularly worrying economic trend. It does justify the aggression of the Northerners, but it highlights a significant social problem that required an urgent solution. What was even more disturbing was that the Igbo did not exercise any form of restraint in their social behaviour; they were unnecessarily showy:

> *I will be the first to concede that the Igbo as a group is not without its flaws. Its success can and did carry deadly penalties: the dangers of hubris, overweening pride, and thoughtlessness, which invite envy and hatred or, even worse, that can obsess the mind with material success and dispose it to all kinds of crude showiness. There is no doubt at all that there is a strand in contemporary Igbo behaviour that can offend by its noisy exhibitionism and disregard for humility and quietness. (Achebe, 2012, p. 76)*

Whereas this economic dominance was a significant ground for antithetical reaction, it demonstrated how competitive individualism and adventurous spirit could be harnessed by committed leaders for the modernisation and development of post-independence African countries. Ironically, political leaders in Africa choose to punish competitive and ambitious groups instead of celebrating them. This is, according to Achebe, one of the fundamental reasons African countries have not developed as they should and have emerged as laughingstocks. In an open display of 'tribal small-mindedness,' they devise crude mechanisms to get rid of the Igbo and replace them with less qualified individuals from the desired ethnic background to gain access to the resources of the state. This bizarre ploy transforms the federal civil service corporations and universities into centres of ethnic bigotry and petty squabbles (pp. 76-77). A state-sanctioned 'environment of hate and resentment created by self-serving politicians' culminates in state-supervised 'persecutions, terminations, and dismissals of Nigerian citizens based on their ethnicity,' 'Subtle and overt attempts to dismantle the structures in place for meritocracy in favour of mediocrity, under the cloak of a need for 'federal character' – a morally bankrupt and deeply corrupt Nigerian form of the far more successful affirmative action in the United States,' and 'tribal discrimination' (pp. 77-8). Unable to appreciate cultural diversity and harness competitiveness for wealth creation and social growth, the political leaders create a climate of fear to maintain political dominance. Nothing captures this rudderlessness more succinctly than this reflection:

> *The political class, oblivious to the growing disenchantment permeating literally every strata of Nigerian society, was consumed with individual and ethnic pursuits and the accumulation of material and other resources. Corruption was widespread, and those in power were 'using every means at their disposal, including bribery and intimidation and blackmail, to cling to power.' (Achebe, 2012, p. 72)*

Unfortunately, the antitheses to this thesis do not produce better results. The countercoup ushers in a similar political environment as 'executions prove to be part of the larger and particularly bloody coup by Northern officers led by Murtala Muhammed' (pp. 81-2). In what Achebe regards as a 'revenge coup,' Igbo officers are killed. Thirty thousand civilian men, women, and children are 'slaughtered, hundreds of thousands are wounded, maimed and violated, their homes and property looted and burned – and no one asked any questions.' In the words of Sierra Leone living in Nigeria at that time, 'The killing of the Igbo [had] become a state industry in Nigeria' (p. 82). This is a very tragic interlude in nation building, a horrendous tit for tat.' That Achebe calls it 'The Pogroms' is not surprising. The birth of the Biafran state does not make things any better for the Igbo community. Save for Tanzania and France, which acknowledged her independence from Nigeria; Western societies preferred to keep quiet. Former colonial powers considered this a threat to their dominance. They facilitated terror-related activities to dismantle this new state. In a poem Achebe titles 'Biafra, 1969,' he metaphorically reveals that '*Voracious white ants/ Set upon it and ate/ Through its huge emplaced feet/ To the great heart abandoning/ A furrowed, emptied scarecrow*' (p. 141).

3. Conclusion

Marxism is a suitable literary theory for interrogating the rich density of Achebe's *There Was a Country.* No one is spared in what appears to be Achebe's idiosyncratic style. In this daringly objective representation, the autobiographical work highlights the political frailties of both Biafra and Nigeria, the Igbo community and other Nigerian tribes. Achebe

employs a new story-telling strategy to demonstrate that alienation and separation deprive individuals and groups of their potential to plan and control their collective fate in a hegemonic political structure. To irrigate commoditisation, obsession with a market-based society, and massage capitalistic egos, a climate of fear is created. Hegemons instrumentalise terror to thwart political attempts to democratise and comprehensively plan post-independence African societies. They lose touch with human values as their decisions are predicated on taciturn profit-and-loss considerations. In these materially oriented societies, there is limited regard for human worth and dignity. Capitalistic societies objectify ordinary citizens. Hegemons unleash terror on innocent citizens because they understand that capitalism thrives in political chaos, uncertainty and anxiety. Whereas profitability is privileged in such chaotic political environments, human need is relegated to the periphery. Hegemons reign terror on dissenting groups – ethnic communities or individuals who are perceived to be politically incorrect – to maintain political power. Living under false illusions of economic protection, persons from the hegemons' communities are converted into political robots, incapable of making independent decisions. Ethnically conditioned to support tribal leadership, the masses find themselves condoning statism, domination and abuse of state authority. Fear drives antithetical responses to hegemonic control. Collective action or resistance, therefore, produces new hegemons. Outcomes of political revolts are not necessarily progressive or linear.

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