

# Chinua Achebe's *The Education of a British-Protected Child*

A review of *The Education of a British-Protected Child* by Chinua Achebe (London: Penguin Books, 2009, pp.172. ISBN: 978-1846-14259-8) by Uzoechi Nwagbara (uzoechin@yahoo.com) of the University of Wales, United Kingdom.

*The Education of a British-Protected Child* is a conversation that continues from where Chinua Achebe's *The Trouble with Nigeria* (1983) stops (see Achebe's remarks in this regard, p.138-9). While Achebe's other critical essay collections: *Morning yet on Creation Day* (1975), *Hopes and Impediments* (1988), and *Home and Exile* (2000) primarily deal with literature and efforts to de-colonise African literature and art, *The Education of a British-Protected Child* is about his experience of Nigeria and the world in general beyond the contours of literature. In the sixteen essays presented in the book excluding preface and notes, Achebe chronicles his experience of the world within and outside Ogidi, his native village in Eastern Nigeria; the antinomies of being British-protected and educated; the need for Nigeria to rise from her development ashes like the phoenix; the imperatives of restoring African heritage; the urgency to revamp Nigeria through the agency of "university leadership"; and the discontents of "resource curse" hypothesis.

In attendance at the inaugural lecture of Audrey Richards Annual Lecture in November 2010 at Centre of African Studies at University of Cambridge, where I bought myself a copy of *The Education of a British-Protected Child*, Achebe, who was the guest lecturer touched on the legacy of colonialism and failure of Nigeria's leadership, which he said were central to the book's message. Talking on the subject matter "Nigeria's Painful History" at University of Cambridge, Achebe brought once again to the fore his usual mantra: Nigeria's leadership failure and its attendant woes. Similarly, How to solve Nigeria's political leadership issue percolates Achebe's writings as an artist, philosopher and public intellectual. This is basically the main thrust of this book. Achebe confirms this:

So the question of leadership was and is pre-eminent, in my mind, among Nigeria's numerous problems ... such as tribalism, corruption, indiscipline, social injustice, indulgence for mediocrity, et cetera. ... My thesis is that without good leadership none of the other problems stands a chance of being tackled, let alone solves (139).

*The Education of a British-Protected Child* is a panoramic snapshot of Achebe's journey for over eighty decades on planet earth; it is about his contemplations on Nigeria's state of siege; it is also about his personal experience regarding family, recognition, friendship, travel, African heritage, education and politics. The chapters in the book were written at different times and represent a *pot-pourri* of Achebe's intellectual musings on postcolonial Nigeria, the paradox inherent in acquiring Western education and his views from outside – but they all coalesce to address one theme: Nigeria's leadership conundrum as well as Africa (Nigeria) being in the shadow of the West given the pressure of leadership malaise. The style of the book is more of story-telling that is characteristic of Achebe, a novelist of repute. The stories range from his childhood days at Ogidi, his village in Eastern Nigeria to the present – his self-exile to the United States of America.

The narratological style is a melange of foreshadowing, flashback and stream of consciousness. It is not actually an academic book, but not lacking in scholarship. As a gifted narrator, Achebe takes us on a journey of Nigeria's independence and the attendant disillusionment that greeted this nation thereafter, which he stated is about failure of leadership. In one of the essays: "The University and the Leadership Factor in Nigerian Politics", Achebe latched onto how what he called "the elite factor" (143) has destroyed the hope and aspirations of Nigerians at independence. Achebe's overriding concern here is that in order to lead ethically in Nigeria, leadership should be taken as "a sacred trust, like the priesthood in civilised humane religions" (143). The book also addresses some contradictions in Achebe's life. In the essay "Travelling White", he recounts how he was segregated against – having asked to sit at the back of a bus during a travelling fellowship, which he refused to do. For the first thirty year of Achebe's life, he was defined as "British-Protected" on his international passport, but this "protection" finds ballast and the antinomy in his experience of the ruse of colonialism as well as the ironies that come with it as he eventually experienced more about the world! Achebe's titular choice provides some antinomies as well. How can he be "British-protected" and face racism? This incident brings the contradictions inherent in his Western (British) education to the front burner. In another piece, "[W]hat is Nigeria to me?", Achebe corroborates this:

Nigerian nationality was for me and my generation an acquired taste – like cheese... The first passport I ever carried described me as a 'British Protected Person', an exciting identity embodied in a phrase that no one was likely to dies for (39).

Achebe also dwells on subject matters ranging from his experience with his father, living with the Great "Zik of Africa" and his great friendship with Stanley Diamond, the famed dialectical anthropologist that knows "Nigeria well" (153) and participated exceptionally in fieldwork dealing with Biafra.

In another piece, “Africa’s Tarnished Image”, Achebe describes Nigeria’s image as essentially a function of slavery; Saidian Otherness thesis propagated by the West; and sadly, being “Europe’s very antithesis” (77) in terms of incapacitated institutional framework and governance to lead development. As Achebe stated, “the vast arsenal of derogatory images of Africa amassed to defend slave trade and, later, colonisation gave the world a literary tradition” (79) that repudiates Africa.

There is no gainsaying that Achebe’s mastery of story-telling is made evident in the book as well as his conviction that only genuine, ethical leadership will bring change in Africa – Particularly in Nigeria. However, *The Education of a British-Protected Child* suffers from an overlay of sanctimonious preachment as well as superficial solutions to leadership issue in Africa (Nigeria). The book does not take a consistent, unified approach to narration, which weakens sense of dénouement that should keep the appetite of a reader constantly whetted; it seems to lose its zest by oscillating between old and new information. It is also a rehash of Achebe’s old essays and remarks, which readers are familiar with. The views shared in the book are a little far away from pragmatic, hands-on issues that Nigeria desperately needs at present: nation building, “resource curse” issues, infrastructural development and oil politics that a recent book on governance and leadership in Nigeria should address. Nevertheless, the “Doyen of Nigerian writers” has done what he knows best: story-telling.