The Nigerian Malaise: A Critical Reading of *The Trouble with Nigeria* By Chinua Achebe

AMOI Evrard

Université Peleforo GON COULIBALY de Korhogo (Côte d'Ivoire)

Abstract:

This article offers a critical reading of *The Trouble with Nigeria* by Chinua Achebe, analyzing the deep-rooted causes of Nigeria's political and moral dysfunction in the postcolonial era. The author denounces the failure of the political elite, whom he holds responsible for the nation's inability to progress, while also highlighting the passive complicity of a society that tolerates impunity and mediocrity. Achebe calls for an ethical reform of leadership, grounded in integrity, accountability, and civic engagement. Through this reflection, Achebe's essay stands out as a major work of African political thought, whose relevance extends beyond the Nigerian context.

Keywords: Accountability – Ethics – Governance – Leadership – Society.

Introduction

Nigeria, the demographic and economic giant of Africa, is often portrayed as a country of immense potential, yet perpetually hindered in its progress. Nigerian writer and intellectual Chinua Achebe, renowned for his powerful novels on postcolonial Africa, steps away from fiction in this instance to deliver an uncompromising essay on the deep-rooted problems afflicting his country. In *the Trouble with Nigeria*, he adopts a decidedly engaged tone to diagnose the causes behind the nation's failure to fulfil its promises. The essay stands out for the clarity of its argument: the fundamental problem of Nigeria is not a matter of historical inevitability or cultural complexity, but rather a deficit of moral and political leadership. Through a penetrating analysis, Achebe rejects the conventional justifications for national instability such as ethnic division, colonial legacy, or economic hardship and refocuses the debate on human responsibility.

The question of political dysfunction in postcolonial African states has prompted numerous critical analyses within the social sciences and African literature. Among the influential thinkers, Jean-François Bayart, in *L'État en Afrique: la politique du ventre* (1989), proposes a socio-economic reading of postcolonial power systems based on clientelism, predation, and networks of allegiance. While his approach is insightful for understanding the logic of resource capture, it tends to prioritize a systemic and structural interpretation of power. On the other hand, Achille Mbembe, particularly in *On the Postcolony* (2000), offers a more philosophical and symbolic analysis of power in Africa, highlighting forms of domination, political imaginaries, and everyday practices of power. His approach emphasizes symbolic violence and the mechanisms of subjugation in the relationship between rulers and the ruled. However, by focusing on the discursive and postmodern dimensions of politics, Mbembe does not directly address the issue of leadership as a central factor in the Nigerian crisis.

In light of these limitations, Chinua Achebe's essay, *The Trouble with Nigeria*, represents a unique and valuable intervention. By adopting a directly political and moral stance, Achebe places the personal responsibility of leaders and the necessity of an ethics of power at the heart of the debate. This is precisely what this article seeks to deepen: a critical reading of Achebe's essay that reaffirms the importance of responsible leadership in the transformation of African societies, beyond the prevailing structural or symbolic explanations. By mobilizing the concepts of postcolonial state, moral leadership, and engaged intellectualism, Chinua Achebe deconstructs the narratives that attribute the Nigerian crisis to external factors, making it instead a matter of local responsibility. Through this approach, he offers a political and ethical analysis of Nigeria's failures, highlighting the collapse of the elites, social complicity, and the necessity for leadership based on integrity.

This postcolonial theoretical framework, focused on the moral reconstruction of politics, allows for an interrogation of the legacies of colonialism and the governance models that have emerged from it, while reaffirming individual responsibility in societal transformation. This article draws on this perspective to analyse *The Trouble with Nigeria*, demonstrating how Achebe renews the issues of power and leadership in postcolonial Africa, emphasizing ethics as a prerequisite for political change. This critical study of the work will be structured around three key points: the condemnation of political elites and their disastrous management, the analysis of social behaviours that perpetuate political deadlock, and finally, the call for an ethical rethinking of leadership as a path to national renewal.

1. The Failure of Political Elites: A Malady Rooted in Power

The first part of Achebe's analysis targets the figure of the leader, whom he considers both a reflection and a driving force of the nation's state. The author identifies a major fracture between the aspirations of the people and the practices of the elites, who seem more concerned with maintaining power than with the responsible management of the public good. In his view, this disconnection

is neither new nor circumstantial, but deeply rooted in the dynamics that have structured power since independence.

The elites are perceived as cynical, often driven by personal or communal interests, unable to develop a unifying national vision. Corruption, poor governance, and clientelism become the visible symptoms of this legitimacy crisis. In short, Achebe paints a picture of a ruling class that, far from constituting a political or intellectual vanguard, instead embodies the main obstacle to social transformation. This critique is all the more striking given the post-independence context of disillusionment. Far from producing the hoped-for emancipation, the power acquired by the nationals quickly transformed into a tool for internal domination, reproducing, and even worsening, the authoritarian practices and inequalities inherited from the colonial period. This is evident in the following passage from his novel:

In spite of conventional opinion Nigeria has been less than fortunate in its leadership. A basic element of this misfortune is the seminal absence of intellectual rigour in the political thought of our founding fathers, a tendency to pious materialistic woolliness and self-centered pedestrianism. (Achebe, 1984: 11)

In his powerful political treatise, *The Trouble with Nigeria* (1984), Chinua Achebe delivers a blistering indictment of Nigeria's postcolonial leadership, identifying the nation's primary affliction as a failure of character among its ruling class. The excerpt under consideration captures Achebe's deep frustration with the trajectory of Nigerian governance since independence. His language is deliberately sharp, chosen not only to expose the inadequacies of leadership but to diagnose a foundational flaw in the country's political evolution.

Achebe's assertion of a "seminal absence of intellectual rigour" points to a profound deficit in strategic and ideological thought among Nigeria's early leaders. By using the word "seminal," Achebe signals that this was not a superficial or incidental issue, but a foundational problem, one that defined the character and direction of the state from its inception. Unlike leaders in other newly independent African nations who articulated clear philosophical frameworks for national development such as Kwame Nkrumah's Pan-Africanism or Julius Nyerere's Ujamaa socialism, Nigeria's founding fathers largely operated without a coherent ideological compass. Instead, their political actions were guided by ethnoregional calculations, short-term electoral interests, and the pursuit of influence. This intellectual vacuum meant that Nigeria entered the postcolonial period without a shared national vision or a principled framework to confront the complexities of governance, unity, and development.

Achebe continues his critique by pointing to a "tendency to pious materialistic woolliness," a phrase that strikingly captures the hypocrisy at the heart of Nigerian political rhetoric. The juxtaposition of "pious" and "materialistic" is not accidental; it reflects the duplicity of leaders who publicly advocate for morality, nation-building, or service, while privately indulging in corruption and self-enrichment. The term "woolliness" adds another layer of meaning, suggesting imprecision, vagueness, and a deliberate lack of clarity in political discourse. Nigerian leaders, Achebe implies, often cloak their self-interest in the language of national duty, producing a form of empty moralism that conceals rather than confronts the ethical failings of power. This criticism resonates with later scholarly frameworks, such as Richard Joseph's theory of prebendalism, which describes the systemic use of public office for personal gain within Nigeria's clientelist political structure. Achebe's analysis presciently reveals how the discourse of virtue has been co-opted to justify the vice of materialism.

The phrase "self-centered pedestrianism" is perhaps Achebe's most scathing indictment. Here, he captures the essence of a leadership class characterized by mediocrity, parochialism, and a lack of higher ambition. "Pedestrianism" in this context does not merely imply dullness or ordinariness; it signifies a dangerous form of small-mindedness, a failure to aspire to anything beyond personal or ethnic advantage. Achebe suggests that Nigerian leaders have systematically subordinated national interest to narrow agendas, reducing the project of nationhood to a contest of self-serving elites. This is not only a moral failure but a structural one. Power is not conceived as a platform for public service or national transformation, but as a means to personal advancement and material accumulation. Achebe's insight parallels Frantz Fanon's warning in *Les damnées de la terre*, where he describes the postcolonial bourgeoisie as inheriting the methods of colonial domination while abandoning the revolutionary spirit needed to build a new society.

Taken together, these critiques point to the deep entrenchment of political failure in Nigeria – not as a series of isolated incidents, but as an enduring condition embedded in the structures and mentalities of governance. Achebe's analysis is not merely retrospective; it is diagnostic. The political elite's failure is not accidental or episodic but is rooted in a culture that devalues critical thinking, celebrates wealth without questioning its source, and rewards loyalty over competence. Leadership, in this context, becomes a means of personal validation and enrichment rather than a commitment to collective advancement. The misfortune of Nigeria's leadership, as Achebe presents it, is thus systemic, originating from the very assumptions and values upon which political authority has been constructed and sustained.

Ultimately, Achebe's passage must be read as both a critique and a call to action. He does not merely lament the state of Nigeria's politics; he urges a radical rethinking of what leadership should entail. His language is carefully chosen to provoke discomfort and introspection, demanding intellectual honesty, moral clarity, and visionary thinking from those who would govern. Decades after its publication, the relevance of Achebe's critique endures. The symptoms he described, anti-intellectualism, moral duplicity, and egocentric governance remain visible in the present landscape. His words challenge not only the political class but also the society that enables and reproduces such a class. If Nigeria is to overcome the weight of its misfortunes, Achebe implies, it must begin by confronting the moral and intellectual bankruptcy that lies at the heart of its power structures.

2. The Complicit Society: Mentalities in the Service of Stagnation

Achebe does not merely condemn the elites; he broadens his analysis to the entire Nigerian society, which he accuses of complacency and passive acceptance of political misconduct. From his perspective, the Nigerian malaise is not limited to those in power, but extends to those who observe and tolerate abuses of power. This second aspect of the problem reveals a deeply sick political culture. Tribalism, the obsession with status, silence in the face of corruption, and the tendency to glorify material success, regardless of its origins, all contribute to the social legitimization of mediocrity. Achebe shows that the people, by valuing political figures without integrity, contribute to the normalization of evil and the entrenchment of the system.

Moreover, the weakness of civic consciousness serves as an obstacle to any reform. The absence of democratic vigilance, lack of civic engagement, and collective disillusionment fuel a vicious cycle in which neither the people nor their representatives fully take responsibility for their roles. The author therefore calls for a re-education of critical thinking, a reform of mentalities, and a collective awareness of each citizen's role in national construction. This is clearly evident in the following passage:

Everyone agrees that there are manifestations of tribal culture which we cannot condemn; for example, peculiar habits of dress, food, language, music, etc. In fact, many of these manifestations are positive and desirable and confer richness on our national culture. But to prevent a citizen from living or working anywhere in his country, or from participating in the social, political, economic life of the community in which he chooses to live is another matter altogether. Our constitution disallows it even though, likes it makers, it manages to say and unsay on certain crucial issues. (Achebe, 1984:7)

In this passage from *The Trouble with Nigeria*, Chinua Achebe confronts the tension between cultural diversity and national unity in the Nigerian context. He begins by acknowledging the value of tribal or ethnic cultural expressions *"peculiar habits of dress, food, language, music, etc."* which he categorizes as positive, enriching elements of the national mosaic. These manifestations, he argues, are not only harmless but affirm the plurality of identities within the Nigerian state. However, Achebe quickly draws a distinction between cultural celebration and cultural chauvinism. When ethnic consciousness is used to deny fellow citizens their rights to live, work, or participate fully in any part of the country, it crosses a line into exclusion and discrimination. This, he asserts, is no longer a cultural matter but a violation of civic and constitutional principles.

Achebe's critique is thus not limited to the political elite; it extends directly to society itself. The practices he identifies of excluding Nigerians from social, economic, or political participation based on ethnic origin are not orchestrated solely from above but are perpetuated by ordinary citizens, communities, and institutions. What he exposes here is a societal complicity in the failure of the Nigerian state to evolve beyond tribal mentalities. Despite the existence of a constitution that, in principle, guarantees equal rights and freedom of movement, entrenched attitudes often render these rights meaningless. Achebe points to a deep contradiction: while the constitution is meant to enshrine national unity, it is marred by ambiguity and double-speak, reflecting the ambivalence of its makers and the society they represent. This ambivalence translates into a society where ethnic exclusivity is tolerated, even normalized.

Achebe's reference to the constitution's tendency to *"say and unsay"* is a sharp commentary on both legal and social hypocrisy. The text of the constitution may claim to guarantee freedom and equality, yet in practice, these guarantees are undermined by widespread tribal prejudice and discriminatory norms. What emerges is a portrait of a society caught between the formal rhetoric of nationhood and the informal realities of ethnocentric division. Rather than confronting these contradictions, society often accommodates or rationalizes them. The perpetuation of ethnic boundaries in housing, employment, and political representation reveals how deeply ingrained these mentalities have become. Achebe thus exposes the ideological and moral comfort many Nigerians derive from maintaining group boundaries, boundaries which effectively hinder the formation of a truly national consciousness.

By highlighting the exclusion of individuals based on ethnic identity, Achebe implicitly calls into question the sincerity of Nigeria's national project. He critiques not just the institutional structures of the state but the collective psychology of the populace. The fact that such discrimination is common practice indicates a deeper societal malaise: a widespread failure to internalize the values of civic nationalism and shared citizenship. In Achebe's analysis, mentalities shaped by ethnocentric loyalty and distrust of the "other" are not relics of the past but active agents of stagnation. They undermine efforts at national integration, frustrate meritocratic ideals, and entrench mediocrity by prioritizing identity over competence.

Achebe's argument thus resonates with broader postcolonial critiques of nationalism, particularly the view that many post-independence African states have failed to transition from ethnic allegiance to national solidarity. The Nigerian case, as Achebe presents it, reveals the dangers of allowing ethnic affiliations to dominate the public sphere. More importantly, it illustrates how a society can become complicit in its own fragmentation. The failure is not only in law or leadership but in the everyday choices of citizens who enable exclusionary practices, tolerate regionalism, and resist cross-cultural solidarity.

In a nutshell, Achebe's passage serves as a powerful reminder that the challenges facing Nigeria are not limited to its political structures but are deeply rooted in societal attitudes and collective mentalities. The stagnation he decries is both institutional and cultural, sustained by a failure to challenge the informal norms that contradict the formal principles of the state. Until these mentalities are confronted by both leaders and citizens, Nigeria's constitutional promises will remain hollow, and its aspiration to nationhood will continue to be undermined from within.

3. Towards an Ethics of Leadership: Restoring Responsibility and Exemplarity

In the final part of his essay, Achebe proposes a way out of the Nigerian crisis, based on the moral reconstruction of leadership.

Rather than settling for a pessimistic outlook, he advocates for a profound transformation of the political culture, centered on values such as honesty, responsibility, courage, and a sense of duty. Achebe asserts that Nigeria possesses competent human resources, but the current system stifles their potential by promoting mediocrity and fostering a fear of change. For him, renewal lies in the emergence of a new generation of leaders with a clear vision, capable of making unpopular decisions if they are just, and able to serve as role models for society as a whole. This vision also hinges on the necessity of real political will to fight against the corrupt practices of the past, and an institutional framework capable of ensuring transparency and accountability. In short, Achebe outlines a genuine political philosophy that tightly links governance and ethics, leadership and citizenship. This is clearly illustrated in the following passage:

But there is also in today's Nigerian social consciousness a powerful impulse towards a new politics of peace and fair play. This impulse may be held temporarily in check by the dead grip of the patriarchs of an adolescent dispensation. But the moment we can free our minds from their unwholesome spell a powerful ground swell which is gathering force even now will launch forth a generation of politicians able to respond appropriately to the challenge of our critical times. (Achebe, 1984: 61)

In this evocative passage from *The Trouble with Nigeria* (1984:61), Chinua Achebe shifts from a tone of stern critique to one of guarded optimism, articulating the possibility of a moral and political renaissance in Nigeria. While the bulk of Achebe's work confronts the failures of political leadership, this particular excerpt gestures toward a redemptive future rooted in ethical transformation. He acknowledges a *"powerful impulse towards a new politics of peace and fair play"* within the collective social consciousness, identifying a latent but growing desire for a more just and responsible form of governance. Achebe is acutely aware that this impulse has not yet manifested into widespread political change, but he insists that it is not absent. Rather, it is "held temporarily in check" by the prevailing grip of an outdated and morally bankrupt political class.

The metaphor of the *"dead grip of the patriarchs of an adolescent dispensation"* serves as a damning characterization of the old guard, those post-independence leaders whose continued dominance represents a stifling of national maturity. Achebe's use of the term "adolescent dispensation" implies a political system arrested in a phase of immaturity, unable to evolve or adapt to the needs of a modern, pluralistic society. The "patriarchs" he refers to are not merely aged individuals but symbolic of a deeply entrenched mode of leadership defined by authoritarianism, tribalism, corruption, and personal aggrandizement. Their "grip" is "dead" not just in the sense of moral decay, but because it chokes vitality and innovation from the body politic. Achebe suggests that as long as this generation maintains control over the levers of power, progress will remain deferred. Yet, his argument is not merely a condemnation of these figures, it is a call for intellectual and moral liberation from their influence.

Crucially, Achebe attributes this stagnation not only to institutional structures but also to the mental conditioning of the populace. The leaders may have failed, but their dominance persists because citizens remain under their "unwholesome spell." This metaphor implies that poor leadership is as much a psychological as a political problem. Achebe implicitly calls for a form of critical consciousness, a deliberate awakening of the mind from the myths and loyalties that keep people complicit in their own marginalization. For national transformation to occur, citizens must first emancipate themselves from inherited political habits that glorify strongman rule, ethnic patronage, and cynical pragmatism. Only by confronting these internalized attitudes can the collective will for a new kind of leadership begin to flourish.

His hope lies in the emergence of a *"powerful groundswell"*, an organic, grassroots movement for renewal. This metaphor evokes a sense of natural, bottom-up transformation, suggesting that ethical leadership will not descend from above but must rise from below. Achebe envisions a *"generation of politicians"* who will be both responsive and responsible, capable of confronting *"the challenge of our critical times"* with clarity, courage, and moral conviction. Importantly, Achebe does not reduce this vision to youthful enthusiasm or idealism; rather, he stresses the importance of preparedness, ethical maturity, and intellectual seriousness. Such leaders must not only possess integrity, but also the strategic competence and historical awareness necessary to navigate Nigeria's complex socio-political landscape.

What Achebe ultimately calls for is a radical reimagining of leadership rooted in ethical responsibility and exemplariness. In contrast to the dominant leadership paradigm in Nigeria, one that prioritizes personal gain, ethnic loyalty, and impunity, he champions a vision of leadership as public service, grounded in justice, transparency, and a sense of duty to the collective good. His use of the phrase *"peace and fair play"* is particularly significant. Peace here is not the mere absence of conflict, but a condition sustained by equity, inclusivity, and mutual respect. Fair play implies adherence to rules, meritocracy, and the dismantling of entrenched privileges. Achebe's vision resonates with broader philosophical traditions of republican and deliberative democracy, which emphasize civic virtue, institutional accountability, and the moral obligations of leadership.

Moreover, Achebe's emphasis on ethical leadership has deep implications for national identity and cohesion. In a society fractured by ethnic, religious, and regional divisions, leadership that embodies fairness and justice can serve as a unifying force. It restores public trust in institutions, reinvigorates political participation, and reaffirms the dignity of citizenship. In this sense, the ethical reformation Achebe calls for is not merely a political necessity but a moral imperative. Without leaders who exemplify the virtues they preach, honesty, service, humility, and justice, Nigeria risks remaining trapped in a cyclical pattern of disillusionment and decay.

In short, Achebe's passage serves as a powerful meditation on the moral responsibilities of leadership and the transformative potential of ethical politics. While he does not deny the weight of past failures or the pervasive cynicism of the present, he refuses to abandon hope. Instead, he invites Nigerians to imagine and work toward a political culture rooted not in coercion and division,

but in peace, fairness, and collective responsibility. Achebe's enduring message is that leadership must rise above mere occupation of office; it must be exemplary, visionary, and anchored in the moral will to serve. Only then can Nigeria emerge from the shadows of its arrested development and realize the aspirations of a just and inclusive republic.

Conclusion

In conclusion, through this article we succeeded into showing that Chinua Achebe delivers a profound and uncompromising reflection on the moral and political crisis afflicting postcolonial Nigeria. Rejecting deterministic narratives that attribute the country's failures solely to colonial legacy or structural deficiencies, Achebe instead directs our attention to the ethical failures of leadership and the complacency of citizens. He refuses to view Nigeria's predicament as an inevitable consequence of history or culture, and insists that transformation depends on conscious moral choices and a reinvention of political responsibility. His central thesis that Nigeria does not suffer from a lack of resources or intellect, but from a deficit of will and integrity invites a radical rethinking of both leadership and citizenship. Achebe's text functions as both critique and exhortation: a diagnosis of stagnation and a call to moral action, grounded in the belief that national renewal is impossible without personal and collective accountability.

Beyond its immediate political context, Achebe's work resonates as a timeless meditation on the ethical foundations of governance and the urgent need for exemplary leadership in any society in crisis. His insistence on integrity, justice, and fair play as prerequisites for sustainable development positions his argument as a credible counterpoint to the rise of populist authoritarianism and elite impunity in postcolonial states. Achebe envisions a politics that transcends opportunism and ethnic factionalism, a politics animated by conscience, civic virtue, and a shared sense of national purpose. His insights remain profoundly relevant, not only in Nigeria but across the Global South, where questions of legitimacy, identity, and democratic accountability remain central. Importantly, postcolonial theory has allowed us to engage more deeply with Achebe's analysis by situating it within the broader discourse on decolonization, power, and the reconstruction of agency in formerly colonized societies. Through this lens, *The Trouble with Nigeria* emerges not just as a political essay, but as a foundational text in the ethical critique of postcolonial governance.

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