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(De) Constructing Achebe's Metaphor Of 'Bull And Egret' Within The Exegesis Of Biafran Nationhood

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Abstract

The novelist, Chinua Achebe also enjoys the reputation as one of the foremost poets who recorded, for posterity, the shades of the Nigerian Civil War experiences. In "Bull and Egret", one of the titles in Beware Soul Brother, Achebe builds on the metaphor of the 'bull' and 'egret' to (re)tell the varying exigencies of the war. About fifty years after, the interplays that were part of the build ups of the war are far from been over, even as the clamour for secession assumes new guises. This paper undertakes a critical enquiry into the allegorical underpinnings of Achebe's "Bull and Egret." The crux of argument is that Achebe's metaphor of 'Bull and 'Egret' comes handy in our present re-assessment of the vagaries of Biafranhood under the umbrella of one Nigeria, fifty years after the war. Achebe's poetic outpourings re-echo the stance that the Igbo nation remains the proverbial 'bull' in an unwholesome and rather parasitic relationship with the 'egret'. The paper concludes on the underlying poetic truth that war is no longer an option but a tactical retreat of the 'bull' from the deliriousness of the 'egret' towards building a true Biafran nationhood.

Keywords: Nationhood, parasite, metaphor, secession, biafranhood, allegory.

Introduction

The Nigerian Civil War, popularly known as the Nigeria-Biafra War began in 1967 after the declaration of the sovereign state of Biafra by Colonel Emeka Odumegwu Ojukwu on May 30, 1967. It and remains one of the deadliest conflicts in the history of Africa. The Civil War which lasted from 6th July 1967 to 15th January, 1970 almost destroyed the unity of Nigeria. The immediate cause of the Civil War has been linked to various sources but it is majorly predicated to the coup and the counter coup of 1966 which altered the political landscape of the nation and destroyed the fragile trust trying to stem and survive among the major ethnic groups brought together as one nation as a result of the 1914 amalgamation. Like most modern African nations, Nigeria is believed to be an artificial construct, put together by agreement between European powers, paying little regard to historical African boundaries or population groups. It is on record that prior to the Civil War, as ethnic sentiments and politics were mounting, and the tension between the Igbo people and the rest of Nigerians, especially the Northerners began to intensify, Gowon and Ojukwu, had a meeting at Aburi in Ghana as part of efforts to fashion out lasting

solutions to the lingering problem. It became a historic tragedy that the peace talk as was intended in Ghana only fanned the embers of what later metamorphosed into a Civil War with millions of Igbo civilians, especially children bound to lose their lives. Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo reports in her review of the facts and fiction surrounding the Nigerian Civil War that:

> The inability of the Federal Military Government and the Eastern Nigeria Government to resolve their differences, which arose particularly as a result of the failure to implement the Aburi decisions, led the East to secede on 30 May 1967. Barely one month later on 6 July 1967, the Federal Government declared war on the secessionist Biafra. The Nigeria-Biafra conflict proved to be one of the most serious and devastating crises that Africa had ever experienced. The conflict has been described as the 'consequence of a severe set of contradictions which existed…between the two belligerent groups (39).

That several literary works have emerged in defense and counter defense of the issues, myths and realities of the Nigerian Civil War is as expected since literature is a product of the realities of a people. Several literary works were written from the civil war, such as Jeremiah Essien's In the Shadow of Death, Okechukwu Mezue's Behind the Rising Sun, Eddi Iroh's Toads of War and Forty-eight Guns for the General, I.N.C Aniebo's. The Anonymity of Sacrifice, Chukwuemeka Ike's Sunset at Dawn, Isidore Okpewo's The Last Duty, Cyprian Ekwensi's Divided We Stand, Chinua Achebe's There Was a Country and Girls at War Kalu Okpi's Biafra Testament, Ojukwu's Because I Was Involved, to mention but a few of these war literatures, all confirming Kole Omotoso's view that the Nigerian Civil War is the most important theme in post-war Nigerian writing.

Much has been said and written on this tragic path that the nation had plunged herself into. The wreckages and fallouts are still haunting and threatening the oneness of the nation. Nevertheless, present dynamics and circumstances in the Nigeria's polity, over fifty years after the war, makes the discourse around it academically relevant as scholars continue to engage the war and its aftermaths in the face of mounting secessionist agitations across the nation. It is on the strength of this realization that this paper interrogates Achebe's metaphor of the Bull and Egret and its implication in the task of nation building in the present day Nigeria.

Chinua Achebe – War, Writing, Poetry, and the Biafran Nationhood

Albert Chinualumogu Achebe, the fifth child of a first-generation Christian Igbo couple in Ogidi, Eastern Nigeria, is reputed as one of the best writers to have graced the African scene. Achebe, in many dimensions, exudes the stature of a fulfilled creative artist and leaves behind, a tall yardstick with which success in literary creativity and activism could be measured. With not too many works to his credit, Achebe nevertheless, proved his mettle as a gifted artist destined for greatness, a confirmation that the success of a writer is not on the multitude of works written but on the impact of these works on his generation, even beyond. Affirming this, Annie Gagiano attests that, "the Achebean oeuvre is not a large one: five novels (none of them very lengthy); a short story

collection; a small body of poetry; four collections of essays or reflections; one work of history/memoir; some children's stories; recorded interviews. The impact that this relatively small output has had and the influence that it will in all likelihood continue to exert is remarkable." (NP)

Situations of war all over the world have historically instigated creative works ranging from works from soldiers who fought in the war, those who played ancillary roles and the rest of the populace who saw the war and felt firsthand, its deadly fangs. The Biafran Civil War of 6th July, 1967-15th January 1970 like every other historical reality influenced Achebe among other of his contemporaries greatly. Affirming this, Samrat Banerjee, attests that "A strikingly new poetics was born, in Nigeria in particular, out of the Biafran Civil war which continued from 1967-70. A number of African poets, pre-eminent among them Chinua Achebe, Christopher Okigbo and Wole Soyinka began to write poetry based on their personal experiences in the civil war that was fought between the militia of the federal government of Nigeria and the resisting volunteers of the Republic of Biafra, the new breakaway state. This new African war poetry written in English not only documented and reported on the savagery of war but also aestheticized the entire war experience." (459) Achebe may not have fought in the battle front like many of the soldiers, the likes of Christopher Okigbo who lost their lives in the service to the newly declared Biafra. But suffice it to say that he played ancillary roles during the war from where he garnered firsthand experiences. These experiences placed him on the right pedestal to speak and comment vociferously on the war in the manner he did in his lifetime with memoirs, essays and the book on the subject of the devastating Civil War. Achebe's confession is that:

> The war came as a surprise to the vast majority of artists and intellectuals on both sides of the conflict. We had not realized just how fragile, even weak, Nigeria was as a nation. Only a few Nigerians, such as the poet Christopher Okigbo, had early and privileged insights into the Nigerian-Biafran crisis. We the intellectuals, were deeply disillusioned by the ineptitude of Nigeria's ruling elite and by what we saw taking place in our young nation. As far as their relationship with the masses were concerned, Nigerian politicians, we felt, had slowly transformed themselves into the personification of Anwu-the wasp- a notorious predator from the insect kingdom.... intellectuals had other reasons to despair:… this opinion may explain why so many intellectuals played active role in various capacities during the war years. (There was a Country, 108)

Ezenwa-Ohaeto in his interesting biography on Achebe did well to capture the circumstances, the pogroms, killings and massacre of the easterners in Northern Nigeria that later culminated in the war. He writes:

> He (Achebe) was shocked into awareness that a large-scale massacre of citizens of Eastern Nigeria living in other parts of the country had ensued. The Eastern Nigerian army officers were slaughtered (among them was Achebe's cousin); then

> ordinary soldiers from the same part of the country were killed; the massacre then extended to senior civil servants , ordinary workers, teachers, business people, technicians, traders, medical personnel and students. The tales ranged from pregnant women with stomachs cut open, to men, women and children locked inside houses that were subsequently set on fire. (115)

In the opinion of Chike Okoye, "that Chinua Achebe like most of his fellow easterners was devastated by the organised riots, killings and pogrom against people of eastern extraction (especially Igbo), is an understatement. First, he was forced to flee Western Nigeria (Lagos specifically) where he worked for the Nigerian government as the Director of External Broadcasting for the Broadcasting Corporation when soldiers started sniffing around for him. The hostilities against the Igbo had spread from the north to other parts of the country making him to spirit his young family away to the east (Port Harcourt) through the sea since roadblocks had been mounted to search out and kill the Igbo fleeing to their homeland." (2) Gagiano further indicates that "the complexity of Achebe's role as a writer (and of his conception of that role) allowed him at the time of the Nigerian Civil War of 1967–70 to insist on the inevitability and validity of his international activism as a sort of roving ambassador and spokesperson for the Biafran cause." (NP)

Critics, overtime, have shown interest in Achebe's verses, especially as they bother on the tragic history of the civil war. On Achebe's war poetry, Ogaga Okuyade asserts that his poem, "The First Shot' 'imitates the awful languid process of a war situation and equally demonstrates that crisis detonates slowly and once it commences, the possibility of dousing it becomes very difficult" (207). Interest in Achebe's poetic oeuvres has continued to reveal deeper critical insights necessary for a holistic appreciation of the poetic stances of Achebe and in keeping abreast with other layers of meaning which his poetry contends with outside the well known historical underpinnings that informed the poetic outburst.

Okoye, exploring Achebe's poetic concern with the civil war experiences , notes that Achebe was able to make a solid mark in poetry by employing deep-seated pathos. Pathos, as Okoye explains, "is a communication technique used most often in emotional appeal" and argues that "Achebe explores the smooth synergy of poetry and pathos in his war poems to communicate his thoughts on the war. Achebe, with clear understanding of the techniques of pathos, deftly produced poetics of touching lines designed to persuade the world and relief agencies to engage in dangerous, risky and night time sorties of relief drops for the suffering Biafrans." (1) Okoye further attests that:

> the novelist Chinua Achebe, left his prose comfort zone and plunged into poetry; perhaps to capture more poignantly the horror around his people. … Persuasive texts could engender war or endanger peace; they could also on the flip side, win or lose wars. They can also curry favour or evoke sympathy; the latter being what the wartime diplomat and poet, Achebe, adopts and applies. The sorry case of

> Biafra during the civil war was not something he could ignore – the world had to know what was going on. (1)

Okoye's summation is that "Achebe's contribution to the trove of Nigerian war poetry though relatively slim in volume, is immensely profound in impact as he brings to bear his characteristic stark frankness, descriptive powers, lucid diction and first-hand experience powered with the literary prowess of an accomplished writer." (5) Abdul Yesufu expresses a similar view of Okoye in his study of tropes and pathos in Achebe's war poem among six other selected war poets. On Achebe's war stance, Yesufu, quoting Achebe, notes that "his war poems were not recollected in tranquility but caught on the wing. Certainly his 'Refugee Mother and Child', described by Don Burness as 'a hauntingly painful poem' because of its infectious pathos, was caught on the wing; it exudes the immediacy of a contemplated scene complete with all the little gestures, movements and routines that constitute it:

> the poet's focus is on a mother and her child in a refugee camp and they are a harrowing metaphor of the uncountable such cases that objectify the catastrophic consequences of war. Achebe effectively evokes the pathos 'of a mother's tenderness/for a son she soon would have to forget.' The vignette he paints is all the more striking because of the manner in which he manipulates the stench of sickness in the expression 'The air was heavy with odors/of diarrhoea', the emaciation and premature withering of the children, and the loving care of a mother, to make a powerful statement about the devastation of war. (464)

In the interesting critical viewpoints by Okoye and Yesufu, it is clear that the renowned novelist, Achebe, succeeded in painting the horrific scenarios of the war to a measure that engrosses the reader in the sordid events of this tragic history, and this subtle and effective manipulation of pathos is part of the artistic techniques that made the poems successful.

Banerjee, offers another noteworthy insight on Achebe's war poetry. The critic argues that the kernel of Achebe's poetry is found in its ample employment of ambiguity. He believes that in shrouding his poetry in ambiguity, Achebe's personas are made to voice one thing while another thing is meant. This, in his view, is typical of the ambivalence akin to his Igbo culture and quite antithetical to the European world view:

> Achebe's style of delineating the horrors of war is shrouded in ambiguity. The poems of Achebe are not just a commentary of the life in Biafra during the years of civil war, but a problematization of the binaries of right and wrong, guilt and innocence, victor and vanquished in the Biafran context. Actually, Achebe quite often takes an ironic stance upon the subject of war. As Achebe himself said "The Igbo people have a firm belief in the duality of things. Nothing is by itself absolute. (460)

Arguing that Achebe's ambiguous and ironic tone is tied to his cultural world view and cosmologic outlook, Banerjee identifies Achebe's 'Remembrance Day" as a good example of Achebe's ironic stance while dealing with issues like 'bravery', 'courage' and 'sacrifice'. (460) On Achebe's observation that the Igbo admire courage and valour but do not glamourize death, ("Remembrance Day", notes) the critic maintains that this attitude towards war in the poem is in direct contrast with Achebe's own personality and responsibility as the emissary for the Biafran cause. Banerjee concludes that, "this duality perhaps has its root in the poet's native culture which glorifies bravery but not death and that 'it is this perception and appreciation of duality that led to Achebe's unique depiction of the multifaceted nature of reality." (461) Arguably, therefore, we can tailor this ironic and ambiguous tone of Achebe's war poems to exude interesting maneuverings that allow Achebe's poetry to speak to all class of people and from the different sides of the divide. This subtle manipulation, paves way for several shades of insights regarding the war and the attendant Biafran struggle, which ironically too, is shrouded in ambiguity and uncertainty. This ironic tone of Achebe, in many ways, betrays his standpoint on the war and it becomes interesting too to note that this tone becomes even much more pronounced in the poem 'Bull and Egret' which forms the major thrust of our discussion in this study.

Gagiano justifies Achebe's declaration that the African writer's place in 'this movement' toward 'the creation of modern states in place of the new colonial enclaves', was 'right in the thick of it. Achebe took part in an international programme intended 'to show that Biafra is all kinds of people and not only starving children' yet he wrote perhaps his most unforgettable poem about a refugee mother and child.' This is also blended with other thought provoking poems about the war inclusive of "Bull and Egret" to which we shall now turn.

Achebe's "Bull and Egret" Figuration

Chinua Achebe's "Bull and Egret" is one of the poems that adorn his poetic collection entitled Beware Soul Brother. Most of the poems in the collection, written over a period of four years, during the civil war and after, are poetic outpourings on history that plunged the nation into deep misery over fifty years after the deadly conflict was seen to have ended. The fact that Achebe resorted to writing poetry just after the experiences of the war, to echo Chike Okoye and Ikechukwu Asika, " serve as an inkling to the belief that poetry is often seen as the most direct, succinct and forceful genre of literature; hence its choice by Achebe to appropriately express his ordeals and those of his immediate community" (48). His poetry collection, Beware Soul Brother bears testimony to the versatility of the novelist and provides an avenue for the writer to express the deep sense of loss evoked by the Nigeria-Biafra war experiences.

"Bull and Egret" is one of the titles identified under the section, "Poems not About War", the last section of the series in Achebe's Beware Soul Brother consisting of twelve poems. Analogous to J.P Clark's "Streamside Exchange", the poem, "Bull and Egret" is in the form of an encounter between the persona, a bull and its counterpart supplicant, the egret. "Streamside Exchange" is one of Clark's poems involving an exchange between a child and a bird one morning near the riverside, an exchange that hinges on uncertainties akin to our human world embodied in the bird's response

to the several questions the petulant child sought answers for."Bull and Egret" reinforces the encounter between the persona and the rest of the two animal figures on their interrupted journey.

The poem recounts the experiences of the persona one morning while driving down the see-saw road to Nsukka, at seventy miles an hour speed when he encounters a bull. 'At seventy miles an hour one morning down the see-saw road to Nsukka I came upon a bull.' (35). The bull is not the regular Fulani cattle which the Fulani herdsmen from the north parade all over farms and villages for a bountiful place for grazing. The bull is typical cattle familiar and reared by the Igbo ethnic group of Nigeria. The Igbo cattle, ehi or efi Igbo is otherwise known as muturu cattle. The name, muturu, as Ezekwe in David Koren explains, is what the Hausa people called this species of cattle owing to its peculiarities that are different from the Fulani cattle. Muturu, as he further explains, means small because the cattle tend to be smaller in size than the Fulani cattle. But the English name is West Africa suck-horn. The bull is stout, usually black and smaller than the Fulani cow. The bull, described by the persona as 'heavy…solitary dark and taciturn', 'so unlike Fulani cattle-gaunt, high-horned, triangular faced- that come in herded multitudes from dusty savannahs,' is representative of a 'tribe they say fate has chosen for slow extinction.' On the surface level of the poem, the bull, the very rare species among the Easterners, is described as fated for slow extinction.

In reality, this specie of cattle appears to be going into extinction due to their dwindling population. Ezekwe notes that the last census in 1992 conducted by government in Nigeria by Resource Inventory Management Limited, puts the population of the muturu cattle all over Nigeria at 115,000 and that the figure is only declining rather than increasing over the years. He goes further to recognize the Biafra-Nigeria civil war as one of the major factors that affected the Igbo cattle when soldiers on both sides of the war sacked communities and killed the cattle for food. But on a metaphorical level, the bull is typical of the people whom it represents, the Easterners, who, from the wreckages of the war years and other bizarre and dangerous sequence of events, are fated to the same slow but steady extinction from the mainstream of the Nigerian nation.

Perhaps, not surprisingly too, the persona is greeted with the sight of an egret pacing the heels of the bull 'intent praise-singer, pure white all neck, walking high stilts and yet no higher than his master's leg-joint.' The bull crossing the road as the persona approaches the 'see-saw' road is accompanied by the egret which trudge behind it, with the singular intent of singing his praises, a sycophant whose motive is to continue to feed on the cattle-ticks and other benefits accruing from the bull. The bull at this juncture transforms to conjure the image of the war lords, the chief actors in the civil war from the Biafran side who are aided by the high singing 'egrets', the supporters and sycophants who chant and urge them unto a war the persona invariably feels should have been avoided.

Initially, the persona ponders on the reason the bull would have left its boundless green estates to trespass on the perilous asphalt, the road meant for cars and humans. This he predicates to odd covetousness, obviously motivated by the enthralling chants of the praise-singing egret that accompanies it: Odd covetousness indeed would/ leave its boundless green estates for a spell of

petty trespassing/ on perilous asphalt laid for me….(35) Slightly offended by this adventure, the persona decides to break their match and with 'frantic blast of iron voice,' his car horn, which 'shattered their stately march, as the bull 'gathered in hasty panic, the heaviness of his hind-quarters, so ungainly in his hurry, and flung it desperate beyond' the persona's 'monstrous reach'.

The allegory on the movement of the bull, inspired by the promptings of the egrets which propelled him to leave his estate of foliage, 'to march across a tattered road', could be interpreted as the various promptings and interplays, the build-ups that finally culminated into a Civil War. The secessionist Biafran side dared the Nigerian government and marched on, armed only with pride and hope to push the frontiers of the newly birthed republic forward, with the 'egret' trudging closely, with rather several selfish motives towards the marching bull. This march is bound to attract consequences and lives were destined to be lost. Pungently, Adauche Okore infers that: 'Achebe expresses his distress on the path which the Biafran rebels chose. Here, the poet admits that the Biafran people chose a dangerous path that involved a lot of violence. The Biafran people were not supposed to choose the war route, for it was inevitable that the government would retaliate. He points out that there were plenty of peaceful and safer approaches than war by mentioning of the 'commodious forest'.'

The stately march of the bull, symbolic of the march of the leaders of the secessionist sides or the rebels, is a poetic summation of the declaration, secession and the war march in the three years of hostility that left million dead in their wakes. 'The frantic blast of the iron voice', a mere hooting from the car horn of the persona in his bid to disperse the bull and the egret is symbolic of the Nigerian army's response to the rebels, the secessionists in the struggle. As Okore further supports, 'the poet illustrates the point when the government took action against the Biafran forces by also using force: 'metallic guns' referring to ammunition made of metal… the only way to immobilize the Biafran forces.''...That iron voice shattered their stately march….' This poetically typifies the onslaught of the Nigerian soldiers' with the full weight of Britain and many other powerful European nations, on the secessionists which ended with Ojukwu's exile and Effiong's surrender speech on 15th January, 1970.

The persona, as he watches the bull hurry away in an uncontrolled speed, interrupting his earlier stately march, almost feels guilty to have dishonoured one of the noble elders which the bull has come to represent. He describes his action as 'unworthy', a 'prank' on the noble elder which he feels is tantamount to 'watching (the elders) hallowed waist-cloth come undone.' But this guilt was short-lived as the persona is pained that while the bull is bearing the consequences of his actions, having abandoned his stately march to scramble for safety away from the road, the egret, its stooge and supporter, is well saved from whatever danger he poses. Described thus, 'Two quick hops, a flap of wings and he was safe posture intact on brown laterite.' The egret is safe on the brown laterite on the road side and it's the bull that struggles and bears the consequences of his actions alone while struggling to be safe from the oncoming onslaught and impending dangers. It annoyed the persona greatly that the egret could carefully and tactfully play on the bull: 'I could

not bear him playing so faithfully my faithless agility man, my scrambler to safety.' The egret is so faithful in his praise singing business with the bull that the bull is in many ways blinded to see how the egret urges it to its doom. The near oxymoronic expression of faithless agility-man, is the antithesis of the strength of the leaders of the warring secessionists. That the agile man, 'the bull', is faithless implies that his strength and faith comes from the egret who is bent on pushing him further even beyond its limitations, and who ironically does not suffer with it at the instances where the violence it orchestrates is seen to erupt. The persona's greatest disappointment comes from the realization that despite this brief occurrence that saw the bull retreating, abandoning its earlier stately march, the egret scampered out from its safety with 'remnant praises of his excellency high-headed in delusion marching now alone into death's ambush'. To this end, there is the revelation that the end part of the bull's journey is death, the only path which leads to the war theatre.

The persona and the bull are safe. This is symbolic or the end of the war and the reintegration of the secessionists once more into the entity of one Nigeria. Nevertheless, the fear is in his obvious realization that after his passage, that the egret will soon be back to its stock in trade to 'take up again his broken adulation of the bull, his everlasting prince, his giver-in-abundance of heavenly cattle-ticks.' It is on this that the real fear hinges, part of the relevance of Achebe's stance on the politics and promptings of the egret that seems not to have abetted, even fifty years after the bull suffered the great violence and retreated for the safety of its species and tribe.

The Metaphor of 'Bull and Egret' and the Exegesis of Biafran Nationhood

As earlier stated, Achebe's poem, "Bull and Egret" is a poetic outpouring on the stark realities of the Biafran Civil War that took the nation by storm within the years of 1967 to 1970. The poem is a poetic summation of the thesis, synthesis and the antithesis of the Biafran struggle. "Bull and Egret" is allegorical and capable of exuding multi-layers of meaning but with a nexus and confluence tangent on the exegesis of the Biafran struggle. The bull in the poem is symbolic of the Igbo-speaking ethnic group within the Nigerian enclave, who were termed rebels during the Civil War. They represent in the word of the poet, 'a tribe they say fate has condemned to slow extinction'. The Igbos captured in the poem as the 'bull', more than any other ethnic group, bore the full brunt of the war as a result of several interplays and forces that played out to the detriment of a people armed with only hope and spirit to survive and be eternally liberated from Nigeria. The 'egret', on the other hand, as the poet depicts, is symbolic of the supporters of the rebels, described by the poet as 'praise-singers' bent on urging the secessionist side even unto their doom. But as this is true, there is also a clear cut insight in which the 'bull' and 'egret' b a metaphor of other shades of reality in the Biafran struggle for nationhood. This is beyond the symbolic and allegorical stances they connote and this is the argument advanced by this study.

The imagery of the 'bull' and 'egret' as the poem presents can metaphorically represent the Igbos and their relationship with the Nigerian nation and the greater parts of the problem towards Biafran nationhood. In reality, a bull and an egret enjoy a rather symbiotic relationship. The cattle egret spends much of its time on land and associates with domestic and wild grazing animals, feeding on insects that they stir up and sometimes removing the ticks from their hides. Cattle egrets follow

grazing cows and eat the flies and bugs that tend to bother the cattle. The movement of foraging livestock also dislodges various insects from the field, which cattle egrets feed on. As Khepera Lartey reveals, 'this type of symbiotic relationship is called commensalism. Commensalism is a type of relationship where one species benefits from the relationship, while the other species remains unaffected by the relationship. As Okore further adds, 'Egrets are also known for eating the ticks off the bull. By choosing these two animal figures Achebe illustrates the gain or benefits in the relationship they had.

Therefore, metaphorically, the image of bull and egret ordinarily depict the supposed symbiotic relationship between the bull and egret and by extension, a relationship between the Igbos and the rest of the nation. But, this is not the case as the poem ironically reveals. This is rather an irony. The egret in this poem is metaphoric of the Nigerian nation that trudge behind the bull, the Easterners, sanctimoniously, insofar as it feeds from the abundance the 'bull' has to offer with no intentions of letting go:'his everlasting prince, his giver-in-abundance of heavenly cattle ticks.' Thus, applying this to the reality of the Igbos in the appendage and appurtenance of one Nigeria, the bull seemed not to have reaped the full benefits accruing from the unwholesome relationship with the egret and unlike the symbiotic and its attendant commensalism, the Igbos have suffered and continued to suffer great hurt from this association. The egret gains and it needs the bull more than the bull needs it. It is this worrisome situation the poem paints that raises crucial questions on the travails of Biafrans in the hegemony of Nigeria owards achieving Biafran nationhood.

Conclusion

Though Achebe is dead, his projections are still relevant in the present day reality of the hegemony of Nigeria. Without any shade of doubt, new voices and activists emerge daily with vibrant intent to champion the Biafran cause. In truth, the 'egrets' are not far away from the 'bull' once more on their various capacities as the clamour for secession echoes louder with war advocated by many as an unavoidable pathway to Biafran nationhood, a repeat of the tragedies of fifty years ago. There is a point the poem speaks to us in our journey to Biafran nationhood. Achebe's poem is emblematic of the metaphor of the nation's sociopolitical reality which calls for serious concern towards the task of nation building. The relationship between the 'bull' and 'egret' is far from being symbiotic but rather parasitic. However, in spite of this lopsided relationship, the poem is an evergreen reminder that war is evil and on no account should the praise singing of the 'egrets' push the 'bull' to the edge of destruction through the use of arms. Gagiano, quoting W.H. Auden in his tribute to William Butler Yeats, notes that 'poetry makes nothing happen' but rather 'it survives' as 'a way of happening, a mouth.' Auden further counters that poetry need not to make things happen; it is itself a 'way of happening'. It is on knowledge that Achebe's poetry is much appreciated and his message in the "Bull and Egret" germane in the continual quest for a true Biafran nationhood.

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