

CHINUA ACHEBE “THE DUTY AND INVOLVEMENT OF THE AFRICAN WRITER” (1968)

Here, Achebe argues that the African writer cannot help but be concerned with socio-political issues, not least the concept of “racial inequality” (162). Africa has been the “most insulted continent in the world. Africans’ very claim to humanity has been questioned at various times, their persons abused, their intelligence insulted” (163). We have a “duty to bring them to an end for our own sakes, for the sake of our children” (163).

The insults in question have emanated principally from Africa’s encounter with Europe. He divides the four hundred years of contact into three periods of contact: the time of the slave trade, colonisation, and decolonisation. During these three periods, European assumptions about Africans have changed little in substance. Whether dealing with the slave or, later, the colonised, there is an assumption of “superiority” (163) on the part of the European.

As a result, Achebe contends, the African writer cannot be “unaware of, or indifferent to, the monumental injustice which his people suffer” (164). Indeed, he argues, it was Europe “which introduced into Africa the problems which the writer was attempting to solve” (165). He quotes a critic called Obiechina on the subject matter and “purpose, implicit or explicit” (165) of African writers which is:

to correct the past in the present in order to educate the West African reader and give him confidence in his cultural heritage, and also in order to enlighten the foreign reader and help him get rid of the false impressions about the West African culture acquired from centuries of cultural misrepresentation. (165-166)

During the period of decolonisation, Achebe argues, the African writer continues to perform an educational function, this time against the forces of neo-colonialism which threaten to recolonise Africans. In particular, Achebe targets the Biafran crisis in Nigeria in 1968 as an example of the way in which the former colonial master continues to manipulate things from behind the scene, utilising “black stooges” (167) to do his “dirty work” (167).