

Chinyere Agabi's *"Thorn in The Head"*: A Study of Social and Political Issues in Nigeria

Kingsley E. Nsirim (Ph.D)

Department of Foundation and Arts Education, Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Rumuolumeni,
Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria

Ihejiofor Kingsley Ikenna

Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Humanities, University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria

ABSTRACT: The paper reviews Chinyere Agabi's *"Thorn in the Head"*, with a view to exploring the Social and political issues that the work portrays. Agabi adopts the literary mode of writing to depict the social and political situations in Nigeria, some of the situations she x-rayed include the Nigerian Civil War experience and its aftermath, political instability, increase in social vices, the undermining of the rich cultural heritage, the close-mindedness of many Nigerians to new ideas as well as their attachment to some Obnoxious life-styles and practices.

KEYWORD: Chinyere Agabi's *"Thorn in The Head"*, Social and Political Issues, Nigeria.

Introduction

Nigeria is an independent nation that occupies a glaring position of prominence in the comity of African nations. Apart from being the most populous country in Africa, with over 200 million people, she is also endowed with abundant human and natural resources scattered across the six geo-political zones. (South-South, South-East, South –West, North-Central, North East and North West) of the country. Added to these natural endowments is the rich cultural heritage of the people which shows in her social, cultural, political and economic potentials. These rare qualities which nature has endowed the nation with, no doubt have earned her the name "Giant of Africa".

However, in spite of these great endowments, it is very obvious that Nigeria has not been able to utilize these opportunities to her advantage, she is not able to muster the political and military will and power to deal with the problems of insurgence and insecurity bedevilling the nation. Up till this moment, Nigeria is still battling feebly with the problem of her internal security challenges, with little prospect of overcoming them. Indeed, after more than sixty years of her existence as an independent nation, it would have been naturally expected that Nigeria would have attained a considerable level of progress and stability in her security, political, social and economic well-being. But rather, and sadly enough Nigeria is still grappling with her challenges. And of course, these situations seem to be worsening by the day. Otherwise, how could one explain the increasing economic hardship, hunger and blood-shed in the country, complicated by the recent change of the Naira currency of the Buhari administration and the current hike in the price of fuel resulting from the withdrawal of subsidy by president Bola Ahmed Tinubu on his assumption of office in the morning of 29th May, 2023?

These situations are indeed, life threatening, and are fast getting to the point that Nigerians though very resilient in their spirit, can no longer endure. This near shattering of their power to cope with hard situations is now manifesting in the general out-cry of the people for God's intervention. These burdens on the neck of the people are fast eroding, among Nigerians, God's given ability to mankind to subdue the earth as enunciated by God in Genesis (1:28). It is in these pathetic situations that Nigerians found themselves that we find the work of Chinyere Agabi-*Thorn in the Head* very illuminating. Agabi has brought to bear on her work her experiences of Nigeria as a failed state which evidences manifest in the agonies of her citizens as they concern the different facets of their existential realities.

Thus, with passion for revamping the ugly conditions of the country, she loves so much, and a strong hope for a better tomorrow, she comes up with *Thorn in the Head*. Agabi bares her mind on the pitiable conditions of the Nigerian state in the belief that Nigerians and their leadership would do a re-think and put-up actions and policies that could bring out Nigeria from her multi-faceted quagmire. She hopes that this effort as her modest contribution would bring about a United and progressive Nigeria. She also believes that her documentation of the ills and problems in Nigeria would be useful in other ways. Firstly, for record purposes, and secondly as warnings for generations yet unborn about the dangers of social and political instability (p. 13).

Indeed, thinking in the same direction with Agabi, it is our honest belief that the type of country we crave for, a land flowing with milk and honey as clearly stated in Nigeria's national Anthem would be actualized through ideas derived from active engagement in fruitful intellectual discourse rather than seeking answers through confrontations and violence. It is in this respect we want to re-examine our author's work *Thorn in the Head*. Indeed, we want to engage some of the issues raised by our author agreeing with her where observations are factual and logical and disagreeing with her where observations are factual and logical, and disagreeing with her where we think her propositions and ideas are inconsistent, and unrealistic. We shall endeavour to clarify issues, offering explanations where her notions and views appear to be inconsistent, and stating our position where necessary.

Our intention is not to support the views of our author or to find fault with her work or to exonerate Nigeria of the situations pointed out in our author's work, but rather to help further expand our understanding of the issues in Nigerian society and as well, helping to search for, and proffering solutions to the problems in Nigeria- a responsibility which our author has initiated, with the publication of *Thorn in the Head*.

Review of the "Thorn in the Head"

The book "Thorn in the Head" is a non-fictional narrative of Agabi's experiences of the events and actions in her country Nigeria. She employs the literary technique to mirror very creatively the Nigerian society, painting the events and actions in the story very picturesque to capture the attention of the reader.

The narrative begins with the title of the book and the picture on the cover page which at first sight evokes two serious messages. The first message is that Nigeria as an independent nation is bedevilled with the problem of poor and ineffective leadership, while the second message is that the man in the picture represent the Nigerian masses who are confused and weakened as they suffer unmitigated hardship and lack brought on them by a confused and purposeless leadership.

This, is an unfettered openness and forthrightness, Agabi notes in the first chapter of her work a basic message which runs through the entire book.

According to her;

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The man was thought to be mad and rightly so because he had a thorn that would neither kill him nor leave him in peace. Everyone knows that when the head is sick; the entire body is sick with it (Pp.3 - 4).

This message in Agabi's "*Thorn in the Head*" represent and emphasizes the perennial poor leadership problem experienced in Nigeria, on one hand, and the confused and traumatized citizens on the other hand. The aforementioned problems can be seen to derive from two perspectives, the political and socio-cultural perspectives. From the political perspective our author observes that Nigeria has not been blessed with the right type of leaders as situations in the country appear to suggest. This according to the author is because "events that unfold everyday keep calling to the present, memories that ought to have been buried to history (p.1).

Indeed, *The Thorn in the Head* signify the poor and unorganized leadership that is unable to grapple with myriads of problems it has helped to breed in the country. The problems are so overwhelming that they put the leadership in a state of utter confusion and derailment, that they are unable to be able to get Nigeria and Nigerians out of their recurrent problems. This means the head (that is leadership) is sick and this sickness by extension has affected the entire citizenry negatively, and make them predisposed to unwarranted actions most of the time, in order to cope with the suffocating situation in the country. In fact, the head that cannot think cannot give direction to the other parts of the body. This literally means that a leadership that cannot think and plan constructively cannot steer the citizens and bring such good governance that would make them happy to willingly submit to the authorities. In fact, it is this paucity of thought and lack of creative thinking that have over the time been exhibited by many Nigerian leaders. Otherwise, how can one explain the inability of Nigerian leaders to live up to the responsibility and challenges of leadership. Interestingly it is important to note that Agabi is not alone in her position of identifying poor and ineffective leadership as a major problem in Nigeria.

Achebe and Nsirim both attest to this phenomenon of confused and failed leadership in Nigeria. Indeed, according to Achebe, "... 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..." (Achebe 1988:11). By this statement, we think that Achebe does not mean that Nigerian leaders do not possess the requisite academic qualifications in their respective disciplines, but that they rather are not put through the specialist and intricate knowledge of governance to be able to appreciate what true and effective leadership entails.

On his part, Nsirim (2021:121) contends that the inability of many Nigerian leaders to live up to the challenges of leadership is due to the uncritical mindedness of the majority of them towards governance. Hence Nsirim recommends the cultivation of what he calls philosophic attitude by leaders and would be leaders. In fact, Nsirim's view about leadership is in tandem with Plato's recommendation of a special education for would be leaders whom he referred to as the "philosopher king".

The fore-going views goes to reinforce the popular axiom that a society is a reflection of the quality of its leaders. The type of leadership a society enthrones or puts in place, no doubt, determines to a great extent the welfare or otherwise of the citizenry and as well, predispose them to accept or oppose such leadership. For instance, as it has to do with the well-being of Nigerians, the author of the work under review avers that bad leadership is responsible for the mass poverty and general hunger in the country. She likens such a hunger to one "...that should cause a rat to eat its tail" and also such that could "cause a man to go crazy and do unimaginable things to everyone" (p3).

This grave picture presented by Agabi of the level of poverty and hunger among the citizens approximates to the real situation in the country. This is because the high level of insecurity caused by kidnappers, armed

robbers and ethnic militant groups are mostly engaged by youths who are driven by frustration because they could not find useful means of livelihood in a country, they call their own. The recent change of the Naira currency which occasioned scarcity of money in circulation masterminded by president Mohammadu Buhari prior to the 2023 General election and the removal of fuel subsidy by president Bola Ahmed Tinubu with subsequent hike in price are some of the instances insensitive leadership that have and are still contributing to the hardship Nigerians are suffering.

Besides, the insensitive and ill-thought-out actions of the Nigeria leadership, the author Agabi who has earlier on pin-pointed hunger in the land as a serious factor responsible for insecurity and deaths, also names some other situations that are detrimental to the existence and well-being of Nigerians and the Nigerian state itself. She identifies the brutality of the armed forces who abandon their primary duty of protecting the territorial boundaries of the nation to clamp down on the citizens, the incessant religious and political tussles amongst the leaders, the activities of oil and gas bunkering (p.4).

She further notes the pessimism the alarming situation in Nigeria has endangered in the citizens who doubt the possibility of ever experiencing good governance in the country, even for a long time to come. According to her, she;

Can neither make head nor tail of the past that stole my childhood, nor of the present that is stealing my middle age pinch by pinch But what should I do about a present that keeps refreshing the past? What should I do about the past that insists on being in the present?"

Agabi's statement here must not be taken as a mere artistic invention or simply an exaggeration of the exact situation, but a realistic presentation of the experiences of Nigerians. In what may seem a corroboration of Agabi's view, Osuchukwu (2012:1) states that:

History repeats itself in Nigeria...The echo of the massacre of Easterners in Northern Nigeria in 1966 still reverberates in 2011, indicating that not much has changed and Nigeria may be on the throes of possible disintegration. President Jonathan's broadcast of April 2011 of sporadic outbreak of riots and killings in the Northern states sends a chilling reminder to the events of 1966 that led to the civil war...

The reviewer of the present work is a victim and witness of the rough political climate in Nigeria, having as a child lost is dear father to the 1966 military coup that toppled General Aguiyi Ironsi led military government. This unwarranted and unnecessary coup, followed by the civil war had claimed the lives of thousands of Nigerians. Up till now, the reviewer, as full-grown adult has not seen anything different from what he witnessed as a child. Even now Nigerians, in one way, or another, are still being murdered in good number, rendering many innocent children orphans in their father-land.

The saddening aspect of the situation is that nobody is ready to speak for fear of oppression and possible death by those the author, Agabi describes as "haters of peace" (p. 12). This is so because, as she claims people who ask questions often die in mysterious circumstances (p. 98). Agabi's position cannot be challenged because there are very obvious instances and evidences of intimidations, harassments and killings of people who attempted to question the hurtful and obnoxious activities and actions of government. Suffice it to mention the heinous cases of the killing of Dele Giwa, the renowned Editor of News watch magazine and Simbiat Abiola, the wife of Alhaji Moshood Abiola and even recently the threat to lives and the freezing of Bank accounts of those who were suspected to be the sponsors of End Sars Protest.

Thus, the question that seems to be bothering the minds of many a good Nigerian in respect of the mindless activities of the supposedly political leaders is, should: Nigerians stop to bother and or ask questions about the unrewarding and detrimental activities and actions of government?

It is in what seems to be a challenge to Nigerians to ask questions about the obnoxious and nefarious action of our leaders, that a Kogi state-born politician Senator Dino Milaye was said to have charged Nigerians to boldly speak out on issues concerning governance because according to him, whether one speaks out or not, one is still in danger of being killed by the “heaters of peace”. The implication of Dino’s statement is that Nigerians should face their problems and challenges headlong, rather than shy away from them. Thus assuming the nonchalant posture of not bothering to ask questions about how the society is governed means hastening the doomsday.

Also, aside from the political and economic burdens and nightmares which Nigeria and their citizens are going through as pointed out by Agabi, she also decries the social injustices as well as the cultural infraction that have come to be prevalent in Nigeria societies. She points out the high level of social injustices in the society, especially as it concerns the poor and vulnerable masses who are the major causalities.

According to her the national army who have the primary duty of protecting the territorial boundaries and the people now turn around to subject the citizens to untold harassment and torture, forcing them to raise their hands while walking in the streets and roads in Nigeria. Such torture includes that of Harrieta, Maxwell’s mother when Uncle Jude her husband’s brother calls the soldier’s attention in a family matter. She however notes with dismay how the rich and the well to do in society escape the soldiers torture and search (pp. 16-17).

On the question of the disregard on cultural and moral issues in society. Agabi notes with dismay how Nigerians are no longer paying attention to the cultural and moral demands and expectations of their respective societies. This is the case with Uncle Jude who fails to offer the much-needed support and care to Maxwell, the mother and siblings who their father left in his care to join the army (p. 44).

The communal life style which manifests in the altruistic disposition of people in the extended family system who displays a life of interdependence and mutual feelings is now sacrificed at the altar of self-satisfaction and foreign individualistic life style. This was hitherto unknown in Nigeria. The traditional Nigerian way of life was such that members of the family, even the extended family cared for one another. Agabi also notes that the issue of child abuse is now prevalent in today’s Nigerian society. According to her, this is exemplified in the case of Theodora who maltreats her step-children (pp 58-60) she recalls how in the past slaves were accepted and treated with some measure of respect and dignity and also how in some areas they are accorded privileges due citizens.

Agabi, also notes the traditional value of respect accorded to elders and constituted authorities in the past. This value is breached by Maxwell when he walks out on Uncle Jude and speaks rudely to him when he takes offence because Uncle Jude makes some marriage arrangements for his two sisters without the knowledge and consent of the two girls involved. However, Maxwell is quick to realize his fault and apologizes to Uncle Jude. Indeed, in traditional Nigeria society. People were known to demonstrate some measure of self-control and self-discipline even in the face of provocation.

Another point of interest that Agabi raises which not only helps us to appreciate Nigerian traditional family leadership but also helps to throw more light on traditional community, is her mention of the dominant role of the male members of the society. According to her, in the Nigerian traditional society, the male members play a more strategic and presiding roles in the family, this is demonstrated in the case of Maxwell who despite his tender age is saddled with the responsibility of taking up the leadership role of his immediate family after the death of his father. His headship of the family covers Theodora, his step-mother, and siblings: Aunty Angela, Maxwell’s aunt acknowledging the fatherly and leadership role of the young Maxwell declares thus: “in the present situation, with the death of your father, you have become our father and the husband of your step-mother”. She goes further however, to point out to Maxwell his tenderness of

age by saying “I know that you are still too young to fit into this role of everybody’s father, friend, provider and comforter (P. 101).

This is why in the traditional Nigerian society; the males are given such high orientation on discipline and the need for hard work so that they are able to effectively carry out their leadership role. Hence any able-bodied man who does not apply his strength to work to earn a decent living for himself and the family is looked down upon, and branded a lazy man (Nsirim, 2020:252). So, the traditional Nigerian society encouraged the male folks to work harder to acquire wealth, prestige and power that would stand in their stead to help them in their responsibilities towards their families and the society.

Another point of interest which Agabi is able to point are some of the obnoxious traditional practices of the people that have become obsolete in the modern society. Such obnoxious cultural practices include forced or unconsented marriages. Uncle Jude plans to inherit Theodora, his late brother’s wife without seeking or making any proposal to the woman. He also tries to arrange marriages for his late brother’s daughters, Augustina and Tonia without informing them before time or getting them involved in the arrangement.

Concerning his intention to inherit his late brother’s wife, uncle Jude declares:

It has been one month since we ended mourning period for Henry. His widow, Theodora has been cleansed properly according to our traditional rites. She is now free to choose a husband from us... since I am the only surviving brother of Henry and also the head of this family. I alone reserve the right to marry her.

He goes on to declare his arrangements regarding his brothers’ daughters’ marriage in the following words: “I have also made arrangement for the marriage of Henry’s two daughters, Augustina and Tonia. Their suitors will be coming here with their families anytime next Sunday” (p. 92). This practice of unconsented marriages might have served its usefulness in the Nigerian traditional society but it no doubt has become unnecessary in the modern time, especially with the introduction of human rights practices as they concern respect for freedom and human dignity.

Conclusion

We have reviewed the crucial issues raise by Agabi in her “Thorn in the Head”. These issues include political instability in Nigeria which has contributed to economic hardship and poverty in the country; some of the social and cultural values of the people that need to be protected and projected, and as well some obnoxious cultural practices of the people that have become retrogressive in the face of modernity.

The issues raised have been subjected to critical examination with the intent to showing the real socio-political situation in Nigeria. It is our strong belief that by our modest effort, we have been able to emphasize the need for Nigerian leaders to be given serious and demanding training in governance and effective leadership. And as well, we have been able to chart another dimension of intellectual engagement in the tackling of the existing problems in Nigeria, and that is by involving Nigerian academics in intellectual discourse as a means towards solving the numerous challenging problems in the country. This is because we believe that many of the problems, we experience in Nigeria cannot be solved through confrontation or warfare; but rather they can be solved through strategic thinking and thoughtful actions. Socrates adopted this method in the ancient Greek city state of Athen by engaging and encouraging the citizens to be responsive to critical thinking as a way of solving the challenges and problems in society. The effectiveness and the attendant positive results of this approach earned him the hatred of the “haters of peace” who subsequently falsely accused him of corrupting the youths.

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