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University of Nevada, Reno

**Humanizing Fiction: How Chinua Achebe and Chris Abani  
Build the Foundations of Peace for Nigeria in their Novels**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Arts in English Writing and the Honors Program

by

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We recommend that the thesis  
prepared under our supervision by

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## Abstract

In Nigeria, novelists Chinua Achebe and Chris Abani address longstanding dehumanization between tribal factions and British colonizers in their novels to build the foundations of peace on a personal and national level. These two authors achieve rehumanization and peacebuilding in three fundamental ways: rehumanizing the “other,” building an identity, and reestablishing agency. Throughout this paper, I will highlight the ways in which Abani and Achebe use their novels with maximum efficiency to appeal to readers on a human level, heal the wounds that perpetuate the divisions between groups, and promote a sense of empowerment that allows individuals and communities to work toward peace on their own terms.

Through rewriting their own history, rehumanizing their characters, and encouraging readers to see the other side of their conflict, Achebe and Abani address two separate conflicts on the Nigerian scene. Their fiction sets demonstrates a variety of ways in which peacebuilding can be applied on a national level in countries everywhere as one branch of a well-rounded approach to reconciliation.

## **Table of Contents**

Abstract .....	i
Table of Contents .....	ii
Introduction .....	1
1. Nigerian History .....	6
I. 1600 – Decolonization, 1960 .....	6
II. Post-colonialism and the Biafran War .....	9
2. Building Peace through Fiction .....	13
3. The Novel in Nigeria .....	21
4. Chinua Achebe .....	29
5. Chris Abani .....	35
I. Background .....	35
II. The Works .....	38
6. Conclusion .....	45
Works Cited .....	48

## Introduction

In the world of African literature, few countries can match the volume that is produced by Nigeria every year. Nigerian writers like Nobel Prize laureate Wole Soyinka and Booker Prize winner Chinua Achebe, among others, are internationally renowned for their literary work, winning more awards than any other African writers. Additionally, Nigeria, like many of the countries that surround it, has struggled with its national identity and independence for nearly as long as it has existed.

But I did not begin this research in an effort to analyze the literary achievements of Nigerian writers. Instead, I was drawn to the topic from an interest in peacebuilding, and the way peacebuilding and storytelling seemed inherently connected. Throughout the development of my personal understanding of peace studies, and given my concentration on English writing, I saw the potential to harness the power of storytelling and its ability to connect people across racial and political divides. Narratives in other forms, including everything from oral storytelling to popular television programming, serve as a way to tell one person or group's story without being too explicit and, ideally, without offending other groups. The more novels I read, however, the more I saw the ability of that particular form to delve most deeply into the personal development of troubled characters, and to allow people on one side of a conflict to form a genuine connection with characters who would typically be their opponents. From there, I hoped that if I could find effective examples of authors who are currently building the foundations of peace in their writing, I would be able to identify the ways in which their style and techniques could be applied to writers in other conflicted areas. As it turned out, I found two such solid examples of peacebuilding in Achebe and Chris Abani in Nigeria.

What drew my attention to the literature of Nigeria in particular was the severity with which the government treated the nation's writers. A survey of Nigerian authors after 1950 reveals a disproportionate number who have found themselves imprisoned for writing what the government considered to be incendiary material. Government leaders, threatened by literary works, attempted to undermine literature and the impact it has on the popular opinion of the people of a nation by removing the authors who produce the material. However, by reacting so severely the authority legitimizes the works they intended to ban, loaning additional political power to writers who might have otherwise been relatively benign. This prevalence of imprisoned authors made me curious about what power these novels had over the people who read them. What I found hardly justified the treatment writers like Abani and Soyinka received. The writers were not calling on people to rise against the government, or to take up arms against their neighbors. In the past 100 years, the people of Nigeria have found ample occasion to do both without much encouragement. Instead, I found that Nigerian authors, in addition to creating literature that is both relevant and lasting, are attempting to rehumanize the Nigerian populations, to allow readers to reassert their humanity after a lifetime of battling racism and violence from other countries and fellow Nigerians alike. Most importantly, these writers are trying to encourage people to see themselves as actors capable of exercising some agency over their own existence and the future of their country.

Two Nigerian novelists who integrate rehumanization most effectively into their work are Chinua Achebe and Chris Abani. I chose to focus on Achebe and Abani because of the breadth of the material they address and their popularity both in Nigeria and

internationally. Achebe, called “the father of modern African writing” by the Booker Prize Committee, wrote his greatest works in the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s, addressing Igbo life under colonial rule (“Chinua Achebe Awarded Man Booker International Prize”). Additionally, he marked himself as an immensely political figure when the Biafran War broke out in 1967, dedicating himself to the Biafran cause and fighting for recognition of this new state. His works struggle to reconcile the Nigerian experience with British imperial influences, to build an identity that acknowledges its colonial history without being defined by it. Abani, on the other hand, wrote his first novel *Masters of the Board* years later at the age of 18, and was imprisoned for writing it in 1985. His concerns were similarly about the Nigerian identity, but writing after the Biafran War was over and the Igbo people had been reabsorbed back into Nigeria, Abani painted a much bleaker picture than what we see from Achebe.

The importance of these writers goes far beyond the development of a national literary scene. For a land marked by so much conflict and violence, especially in the aftermath of the civil war, these writers provide a service in elevating the value of storytelling in the interest of building a lasting peace. Abani himself notes that Nigerians are renowned for their ability to tell stories, and even for their inability to stop (*Chris Abani*). But here it is important to recognize that storytelling serves more than a social function, connecting families with their past and people with each other. In this instance, storytelling, particularly in the form of writing fiction (novels and novellas), allows Nigerians to build an identity of their own, to create control over their own existence by framing how they are seen by themselves and by those around them. This self-determination is key to moving beyond conflict, past ending violent interactions between



groups, to create a sustainable peace that gives proper respect to separate tribes and their identities.

There is some precedent for the importance of storytelling as a key element in peacebuilding. In Elizabeth King's article about post-genocide Rwanda, she discusses how the official, state-sponsored version of violent events can hinder the process of peacebuilding, preventing citizens from coming to terms with the reality of the trauma they survived (297). By allowing the state to dictate official records, priority goes to saving face politically, a focus few governments would let go in the interest of healing the old psychic wounds of their citizens. What Achebe and Abani both attempt to do with their work is to take the national voice out of the Nigerian government's control, and to encourage the citizens of the country to define their own experience. Allowing people to thus actively participate in their own development encourages healing of wounds left by ethnic and religious struggle between groups within the country — between British and Nigerians in the case of Achebe, and between Igbo and Yoruba in Abani's work. For a country that has only existed as such for a little over half a century, and was somewhat hastily thrown together as a colony for about fifty years before its independence, this is no small feat.

The suggestion of this study, that rehumanizing groups through literature is a key element to building lasting peace between conflicted populations, is not just limited to West Africa. While completing this research, I continually asked myself, what can these cases in Nigeria tell us about areas of conflict in the rest of the world? Is it possible that fiction can be used reliably in order to build peace in areas that are still wounded by war? Art and literature — including, but not limited to, the novel in certain cultures like

Nigeria — play an integral role in soothing long standing tensions between groups, rehumanizing all sides more thoroughly than any laws or regulations can. But can these effects be counted on to offer the same relief to populations elsewhere in the world?

## **1. Nigerian History**

### **I. 1600 – Decolonization, 1960**

Though Nigeria did not exist as a country until 1960, and was not unified as a protectorate of the British Empire until 1900, the history of this land and its interaction with the West stretches back much further. In the fifteenth century, Portugal became the first European country to develop a slave trade with Benin, which borders Nigeria on its western boundary. Once the Portuguese established and secured this trade route, the door was opened to Dutch, French, and British traders over the next century who fought for sole control over the slave trade in West Africa (Ubah 451). Meanwhile, the tribes in this area were developing at a rapid pace and alternating dominance over surrounding tribes. The Yoruba, Oyo, and Igbo kingdoms each rose and fell in power several times over this period, starting an early history of competition that would come to fruition in the twentieth century during the Nigeria-Biafran war. From the great expansion of transatlantic slave trade in the 1600s to the British law prohibiting transatlantic slave trade in 1807, West Africa saw a huge increase in European, and especially British, influence. Though Britain legally prohibited international slave trade, it was nonetheless unwilling to give up its foothold in West Africa, so it pursued other types of trade under the Royal Niger Company.

The Royal Niger Company, more than solely providing income for the British, effectively blocked competing European powers from trading in West Africa, setting the foundations for the colony they would create in the area that would become Nigeria. It is in this pre-colonial period that Chinua Achebe set his most well known novel, *Things Fall Apart*, exploring these early interactions between Igbo and colonizer. During the

process of procuring slaves to trade, the traders delineated the land, combining villages and surrounding areas of several tribes into what they considered one unified territory which the British claimed as their own in 1900. The British utilized indirect rule, or governing through rulers who had already been defeated, as we see in Achebe's *Arrow of God* set during this time, in order to avoid excessive resentment from the local populations.

Not long after official colonization, in the early 1920s, Herman Macaulay kicked off the nationalist movements that would come to dominate the Nigerian political scene for the next fifty years, eventually resulting in the civil war. Often called the "father of Nigerian nationalism," Macaulay founded the Nigerian National Democratic Party in 1922, calling for the African people to develop a sense of political awareness and become involved in self-government, even under British rule (Johnson 3). The party held a significant amount of power and sway over the Nigerian people until it was undermined, and eventually defeated, by the Nigerian Youth Movement. Much in the way that politics in Nigeria have always operated, the Nigerian Youth Movement splintered along ethnic lines, the most notable of which was the Yoruba party, Action Group, which survived in some form until 1966 (Arifalo 75). While the movement as a whole lost its cohesiveness, two other political parties ascended to a position of power in the 1940s—the mostly Muslim Hausa-Fulani Northern People's Congress, and the predominantly Catholic Igbo National Council of Nigerian Citizens—and Nigeria was divided regionally by its predominant parties (Nicolson 384). What we see in all of these movements is that the people of Nigeria—as reflected in the tendency of its authors, including Achebe, to be more pan-African or ethnically oriented than nationally concerned—had developed a

thirst for casting off colonial influence, but had no ties to the country they inhabited.

None of these movements for independence desired to create a national identity for the Nigeria that had been created for its citizens by the British, but instead fostered competition and resentment between separate political, ethnic, and religious factions.

As early as 1938, Yoruba-Igbo rivalry in particular had become a serious issue as both of these populations worked separately for political acknowledgment. Originally, the Yoruba and Igbo people, as well as the Hausa-Fulani, had cooperated with each other in order to at least reduce the influence of the British, but their separate goals consistently drove them apart. Finally, in 1946, the Richards Constitution established separate legislatures for each of the three regions, allowing them to operate independently with minimal interaction and, ideally, minimal conflict between groups (Griswold xvii). Following the Richards Constitution, the Lyttleton Constitution (1954) officially divided the region along political and ethnic boundaries, allowing self-governance and paving the way for independence in October of 1960.

This period in the 1950s that preceded Nigerian independence from the British Empire significantly influenced the way people and culture at the time conceptualized their identity. Examples of this influence can clearly be seen in Achebe's first novel, *Things Fall Apart*. Published in 1959, *Things Fall Apart* tells the story of Okonkwo, an Igbo man living under British colonialism who struggles both with his own tribal customs and with the white missionaries who attempt to impose their belief system on his people. Achebe thus highlights not only the need for Nigerian independence from Britain, but also the sometimes tentative and potentially damaging relationships within and between tribes.

While this effort for independence took several decades to achieve and encountered numerous challenges along the way, the decolonization of Nigeria was relatively simple. Frantz Fanon famously wrote in *Wretched of the Earth*, “decolonization is always a violent phenomenon,” claiming that due to the bloody, oppressive nature of colonialism, a country must have a bloody fight for freedom to effectively achieve self-determination (35). However, the process of Nigerian colonization was relatively peaceful, especially compared to surrounding countries in West Africa. Likewise, the Nigerians achieved independence through an almost shockingly peaceful process, even when it split the country along ethnic boundaries. While there was undoubtedly damage done to relationships between populations in Nigeria during the sixty years that it was officially part of the British Empire, most of the political and social unrest that would drive these people to a civil war in the coming years was not about an outright struggle with the British for acknowledgment of indigenous culture. Instead we find that the civil war was a result of forcing disparate tribes with unique sets of political and cultural needs to be governed under the title of a unified territory.

## **II. Post-colonialism and the Biafran War**

The results of attempting to unify the Yoruba, Hausa-Fulani, and Igbo under a single government immediately began to manifest in civil unrest and violence in the 1960s. There was widespread political disillusionment and riots in larger cities. In 1966, after a coup of Igbo officers and several assassinations in the north, mob violence broke out against Igbo civilians (Griswold xviii). Attempting to save themselves from further persecution, many Igbo moved east and, in May of 1967, voted to secede and form the

Republic of Biafra. The civil war broke out shortly thereafter, in July, lasting until Biafra surrendered in January of 1970. During the war, Europe once again became involved in Nigerian affairs as Britain and the Soviet Union offered their aid to the Nigerian federalists, while France provided some unofficial support for Biafra (Ogunbadejo 22). Attempts to reintegrate the Igbo who seceded back into the wider population was “largely successful” (Griswold xix), although there was still considerable discrimination against them, manifesting in unemployment and underrepresentation in the government.

The resulting culture, one of poverty and struggle for the Igbo against surrounding tribes and with the British whose influence once again threatened to dominate their existence, set the foundation for Chris Abani’s works. Throughout his novels, especially *Becoming Abigail*, Abani’s characters struggle to find acceptance among their own while placing themselves in the British system that still shapes their culture. But the financial hardships the Igbo faced were not just limited to their tribe—the entire nation had been struggling for years to support itself on a shaky agriculture-based economy, and there was little wealth even among more accepted populations. What funds were available after the Nigerian economy turned around in 1974 were misappropriated by the unjust government. Corruption abounded, and resources were wasted on frivolous urban projects while rural populations, including many Igbo who formed their own villages after the war, continued to struggle on in poverty.

The waste and corruption that dominated the Nigerian government in the 1970s and 1980s set the stage for third generation writers such as Abani who addresses these injustices directly in his work. A little over a decade after the end of the civil war, the Igbo found themselves relatively accepted in Nigeria, but ethnic and religious divisions

were always evident. While many of the tensions within the country could arguably be attributed to the lingering inequalities imposed upon the tribes by the British government during its rule, by the time Abani started writing, there were more conflicts between tribes than between countries. In 1985 when he published his first book, there was so much civil unrest and government corruption that his novel was read as a blueprint for another military coup by paranoid leaders, and Abani was forced to serve time in prison. So from the earliest point in his career, Abani did not struggle against the white man as much as he struggled against his fellow Nigerians, and he turned the focus of his work to the government that punished him for his expression.

These two Igbo writers, Chinua Achebe and Chris Abani, both struggle with their tribal identity in a world defined for them by outdated British rule. However, the time between them—Achebe setting the foundation for Nigerian literature at its beginning (many consider the African novel to have started only seven years before Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* in 1952 with Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*) and Abani starting his writing nearly thirty years and two generations later—leads them to address these issues in completely separate ways. Both authors address the nuances of tribal identity in different periods of struggle in Nigerian history, writing to two different generations of readers. Regardless of the differences in their work, Achebe and Abani both write stories of two flawed sides who fail, time and again, to do what they would find beneficial for themselves and for those around them. Their characters are all flawed, broken by circumstances that seem beyond their control, reflecting the unending struggle for control of power within Nigeria. But most importantly, both of these authors make their protagonists and antagonists broken but sympathetic, allowing readers to put



themselves on both sides of a conflict. Encouraging this sort of empathy is one of the first steps in creating fiction that humanizes those who read it, building the foundations of peace in conflicted areas.

## **2. Building Peace through Fiction**

To see how Achebe and Abani are contributing to peacebuilding efforts in Nigeria, it is important to understand the ways in which literature and peace are connected. Through both dehumanization and rehumanization, literature and other cultural factors exert a notable, but often underrated, effect on societies and their ability to both build up to war and rebuild peace in the wake of conflict. Organizations such as the Nigerian Centre for Peace Education and the University for Peace have long been searching for the best ways to approach reconciliation and counter the lasting negative effects of conflict in Nigeria. Internationally, the effort to build sustainable peace, especially in countries with a number of historically opposing factions, has always been a challenge, even after the physical conflict and violence have been brought to an end. In his article, Ervin Staub, who works with survivors of the genocide in Rwanda, discusses steps he has found to aid in creating lasting peace: “Understanding the origins of violence appears to be an important tool in promoting reconciliation and preventing violence. Prevention requires, in part, the opposite of the influences that lead to violence, such as humanization of the other, in place of devaluation” (874). Here, Staub calls attention to the fact that violence between groups is not a spontaneous occurrence. Aside from physical violence or the threat thereof, many smaller factors contribute to the development of intractable conflict, including, he notes, dehumanization.

Dehumanization is one of the earliest steps in the manifestation of large scale violence, as it encourages both sides of a conflict to see the other as less than human. It can be defined as the process of devaluing a person or group, stripping them of their humanity, and eventually denying them basic human rights. This process is accomplished

through a variety of means, especially by verbally shaping popular conception of a group of people through the conscious use of derogatory language, or through consistently blaming a group for the problems of a nation. One clear example of dehumanization at work can be seen in the early stages of the genocide in Rwanda where the Hutu rebels took control of the radio, repeating the message that Tutsis were cockroaches, subhumans who needed to be exterminated (Bromley 45). By simply repeating this message, making claims that were clearly untrue, the Hutu managed to establish this dehumanized perspective in the minds of citizens across the country, an imperative step in allowing the moral justification of violence and other atrocity to otherwise ethical and logical actors. Similarly, in colonial Nigeria, the colonized people were dehumanized through the use of words like “savage,” implying they were inferior to their colonizers. Years later, after the civil war ended, Igbos were likewise dehumanized by being held responsible for the entire hardship of the war.

Considering the time and effort that go into dehumanizing victims of intractable and long-term conflict, it becomes necessary for both sides to gradually deconstruct this view and rehumanize both themselves and their enemy in order to achieve any sort of peaceful coexistence. Rehumanization can thus be seen as the undoing of dehumanization, the rebuilding of a valued human identity for people who have been socially subordinated. Through this process, mass violence is once again made irrational in the conflicted population, an action taken as a last resort when all other approaches have failed instead of becoming a widespread fact of daily life. Like dehumanization, rehumanization of one’s enemies takes time and effort, supplemented by cultural messages that inform the way people interact with those around them. This factor is most

notable in studying the impact of novels on peace movements. As we will see, one product of both Achebe and Abani's work is the humanization of both sides of a conflict.

In order to determine whether or not fiction can contribute to a reduction of tensions and help build the foundations for long term peace, it is first necessary to define "peace." A simplistic but intuitive definition might reference a lack of physical violence and a sense of safety and security. While these factors are a significant aspect of peace, the definition is lacking a nuanced understanding of social factors within any complex society. As Erin McCandless and her fellow contributors from the University for Peace discuss in *Peace Research for Africa*, the mere absence of conflict or adherence to public order does not constitute sustainable peace. Though achieving public order is an important goal in the process of conflict resolution, that sole aspect does not question the status quo or pursue justice, potentially leaving old wounds unhealed and threatening instability in the future should these same tensions be excited again (McCandless and Bangura 92). The University for Peace Africa Programme instead offers the following definition specific to Africa:

The African perspective sees peace and development as intimately related: it sees peace not only as the resolution of conflict but as the transformation of extant social systems at both national and international levels. It is a concept which relates peace to the physical, social and existential needs of people. (McCandless and Bangura 93)

Key to understanding this definition is the transformation of social systems that create the foundation for violence within a society. Without addressing the system to demand change, citizens leave themselves open to a repetition of events, including both physical and social violence. Informed by the perspectives above, I am lead to define peace as a

state of order, safety, and harmony among all people in a defined area wherein the social systems support justice and equally protect the rights of all groups.

To enact this change, peacebuilding strategies, which may often seem ambiguous from an academic standpoint, must be implemented. Bureaucratic means, both political and legal in addition to military action can often achieve an end to severe conflict.

However, these objective methods fall short of addressing social and cultural factors that contribute to the development of violence. In an attempt to define the struggle to change the less quantifiable aspects of conflict, the United States Institute of Peace defines peacebuilding as follows:

Peacebuilding is the transformation toward more manageable, peaceful relationships and governance structures – the long-term process of addressing root causes and effects, reconciling differences, normalizing relations, and building institutions that can manage conflicts without resorting to violence. (“Peace Terms” 40)

Building nonviolent institutions is well within the realm of the government’s capacity, but normalizing relations and addressing root causes requires deliberate cultural action, a task best left to those who speak to a nation through less formal channels. To address the root causes of conflict and rehumanize conflicted populations, the novel becomes a medium of preference, allowing readers to see a situation from a different but powerful perspective.

Novels facilitate peacebuilding through rehumanization in three key ways: humanizing the other, building an identity, and reestablishing agency. The first way in which novels rehumanize is by showing one population that their “enemy” is not all that different from themselves. This first step at peacebuilding is essential, diminishing the “us vs. them” mentality that often leads down a long path of revenge for perceived

wrongdoing and strong barriers between populations. Novels offer a unique way of resolving this aspect of conflict in allowing an in depth view of other cultures, highlighting similarities without demonization or antagonism. Next, novels contribute to the development of cultural, national, and individual identities. As can be seen clearly in Achebe's *Arrow of God* and Abani's *Becoming Abigail*, the characters within novels are often struggling to create an identity of their own. By guiding characters through this process, authors encourage their readers to follow suit: to create an identity in spite of the obstacles they may meet in their individual story lines. Once they have an identity of their own, independent of their role as victim, oppressor, or any other actor in a conflict, these individuals or groups are then better equipped to work toward changes within the system that will allow for lasting peace. Lastly, reestablishing agency provides a moral boost to victims and victimized groups, minimizing the sense of futility that often accompanies long-lasting conflict. Novels achieve this reestablishment of agency both by playing out this scenario with their characters within the novels, and by the act of writing a novel for themselves. Achebe and Abani, both members of victimized groups in their time (from colonial rule to the Igbo being held responsible for the Biafran war), reclaimed the power of writing their own narrative. By creating their novels, they no longer allowed their oppressors to identify them or shape their existence, choosing instead to do so for themselves.

Utilizing these three methods of rehumanization, the novel has a history of calling for social change by highlighting the roots of a conflict. This phenomenon can be seen in several novels from other cultures, including the United States. Moved by the injustices of slavery in the nineteenth century, Harriet Beecher Stowe utilized humanization in her

fiction to inspire national mobilization to change a corrupt system. Her novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is credited with lighting the fuse that ignited the Civil War, reportedly inspiring Abraham Lincoln to say upon their first meeting, "So this is the little lady who started this great war" (Stowe 203). Stowe's contribution to the war was not in calling for a beginning to the altercation, or even in overtly rallying troops for the battle, but in exciting already tense relationships between abolitionists and defenders of slavery. Her novel achieved what first hand accounts had somehow never managed to do: humanize the experience of slavery for those who had never experienced it. She awoke in ambivalent readers the compassion that inspired action, calling for an end to the institution they had accepted and endorsed implicitly through inaction in the years leading up to the war. Perhaps more than public speeches against slavery, Stowe's book and its message spread quickly and widely across the country, selling out its first three printings within days of their release (Levine 74). The path to the Civil War, and indeed any war, is marked by social and political conflicts that break down the coexistence between two groups such as the American North and South. Stowe thus made her contribution to the war by using her fiction to show the nation the reality of the institution it so hotly debated. She made it more painful for the uninvolved citizens to continue to abstain from the debate than to take up their guns and engage in a war to end slavery. In this way, Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* provides a useful model for viewing fiction and its relationship to the escalation and diminishment of conflict.

Using this model, we can see how other popular literature has attempted to address and humanize the costs of violent conflict to reduce tensions and offer resolution after the end of an altercation. On the other side of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Stephen Crane

wrote *The Red Badge of Courage* to demonstrate the human cost of the civil war through the eyes of one struggling young soldier. His novel further attempts to minimize the differences between the North and South, showing that the devastation of war strikes all sides equally. For a more recent piece of humanizing fiction, readers may see *The Sorrow of War* by Bao Ninh as a strong example of a writer attempting to show one side their “enemies” in a more human light, as Ninh’s novel about a Vietnamese soldier has found a wide audience in America as well as Vietnam.

Much as Stowe, Crane, and Ninh appeal to a sense of compassion and humanity within their readers, Chris Abani does the same for his fellow Nigerians in the wake of the Biafran war. As we will see in the next chapter, Abani, like many other Nigerian writers, was arrested and imprisoned for writing his first novel *Masters of the Board*. Later, he explained that he wrote this book because he felt it was necessary to tell his fellow Nigerians a story in a Nigerian voice, to create a history that was not westernized and dismissive of native culture, as a vital part his development; he explains “What we know about how to be who we are comes from stories” (*Chris Abani*). In this case, Abani understood that it was imperative to the wellbeing of Nigerians to have a hand in creating their own identity, free from the influence of those who considered all Africans primitive, prey to their most basic desires. Unlike Stowe, who lived free and white in Connecticut, Abani’s work is influenced by his personal experience of injustice. After a long history of his people suffering dehumanization through slavery and British colonization, Abani’s writing was the most natural way to encourage Nigerians, a nation of storytellers, to rehumanize themselves independently of those who undermine their dignity.



However well-intentioned Abani's motivations may have been, it is clear by his imprisonment that the government can perceive literary art to be a serious threat in a country that strives for such strict, rigid control over the people it is ruling. The threat in *Masters of the Board* and in Abani's subsequent works was not strictly in their content, but in his ability as a writer to show what is broken in the system that currently exists. Achebe incorporates much of the same skill and focus into his work, producing strong novels like *Arrow of God* that manage to humanize both the colonized and colonizers in Nigeria without demonizing or insulting either side. In this way, Stowe sets the standard for literary power to which Abani, Achebe, and the whole canon of Nigerian writers hold themselves in that they write not to persuade populations to take up their opinion, but to demonstrate what is wrong. The novel allows these writers the unique ability to present their point of view, to expand their readers' minds, and to introduce them to the profoundly flawed but essentially human characters who represent a variety of both African and Nigerian experiences without forcing their message into an overtly political piece. Instead, the novel approaches the subject with nuance, maintaining the ability to stand alone as a work of literary art independent from the struggles in the nation at the time.

### **3. The Novel in Nigeria**

When investigating means of building peace in conflicted areas, it is rare to see the promotion of novels, or other types of literature, listed in proposed tactics for addressing the long-term problems between antagonistic groups. However, the novel and other artistic works, more than laws and regulations meant to keep people in line, have the unique ability to address some of the underlying sources of lasting conflict. As seen in the previous chapter, the United States Institute of Peace describes several key elements of peacebuilding, emphasizing “root causes and effects, reconciling differences, [and] normalizing relationships” (“Peace Terms” 40). It is this aspect of peace, more than bringing conflict to an end, to which the novel is so well suited. In its long form, a novel can develop an intimate and insightful view of the characters within the story, allowing the reader to better understand what motivates and moves these fictional people.

One matter that must be addressed is the significance of the novel in Nigeria. As the largest country in Africa, Nigeria has the largest audience for media and culture, and has a strong history of exploring a variety of outlets for creative expression. From television shows to movies, from theater to the novel, Nigerian artists tend to be well represented. One particularly well-known playwright, Wole Soyinka, is quoted as saying that theater is the form that he finds most revolutionary, to which Chris Abani, who works in media including theater, poetry, and novels, responded that he finds literary expression to be a most democratic art form: “I think that it is revolutionary, and part of the revolutionary ability I think is that in as much as it can be a removed and elitist form... it can be a way in which average, everyday, disempowered people can gather their ideas around politics and enact the change they want their life to become” (Ellis

168). In fact Abani's life did become the change he wrote about, landing in prison for the degree of revolutionary thought he represented. But he demonstrates clearly that as far as the creation of Nigerian literature, the process is not far removed from the average literate person.

As relatively accessible as writing is in Nigeria, its inherent value lies more in the connection it creates between reader, writer, and character. Over the course of a novel, authors introduce their audience to their characters and have a relatively long period of focused attention, typically more than one hundred pages, to show readers an inside perspective into someone else's experience. The darkest moments, the hardest it would be for an actual person to live through and discuss, are often the ones that are most revealing in the vulnerability of the character and of the author who created it. Abani discusses the importance of vulnerability in art: "I do think the most successful art finds a way to expose some of the artist's vulnerability. This allows the audience to not only locate themselves in the work, but to feel safe to explore that in themselves. That is how connections are made" (Ellis 170). The connections made are not solely between the audience and character, or even between reader and writer. The most skillful of artists encourage audiences to connect with themselves and with every person in which they can see that essential humanity. This recognition is key to the rehumanization that builds the foundations of peace by breaking down some of the strict divisions between groups that keeps people separated, angry, and fearful. Abani goes on to say, "James Baldwin once said that your suffering and pain, in art, mean nothing unless they serve to allow others to connect to their own suffering" (Ellis 170). This attitude toward connecting people through suffering is especially clear in his novel *Becoming Abigail*, in which he relives

some of the torture he experienced during his time in prison through the character of Abigail. He rewrites his suffering in such vibrant, clear language that it makes it difficult to turn away from Abigail and her pain, encouraging readers to feel their pain with her, to empathize and grow together from a perceived shared experience.

Once reader and writer have some common experience, such as living through the details of a fictional event together, the author then has the ability to tie in larger implications for his or her work. This is especially true of Chinua Achebe in *Arrow of God*. In this third novel, and to a comparable extent in his first two books, Achebe “follows the course of history with accuracy, and at the same time manages to confirm that fiction is a great deal more true than fact, for he shows events happening to actual persons and within actual persons, and this is something that few history books can do” (Laurence 113). In this way Achebe structures his novel around rehumanizing history and the people on both sides of it. In *Arrow of God*, readers are immersed deep in the inner life of Ezeulu as he struggles to survive and protect his religion at the intersection of the old tribal ways and the infiltrating effects of Christian British culture. Ezeulu’s story, though not the true tale of any one Igbo man in the early twentieth century, gives a face to the experience of a generation, allowing those who were not affected by these events firsthand to experience them in a meaningful, personal way, and to help those who did live through early colonization to make sense of the events they witnessed and the action they took.

While Achebe and Abani can be seen as writing for both insiders to the Nigerian and Igbo experience and for the Western world, their real audience is more difficult to decipher. King writes:

There was once a time when African literature was written in New York and Paris by black men attempting to justify their cultural heritage. Although such literature contributed to the political and cultural awakening of Africa, its values were shaped by the expectation of its American and European audience. (304)

While some audiences of Nigerian literature remain abroad in the United States and Europe, the vast majority of the readers of Nigerian novels are in fact Nigerian citizens. However, this is not meant to imply that all Nigerians are reading these novels. As Wendy Griswold points out in her book *Bearing Witness*, the number of Nigerians reading novels depends on a large variety of factors, most notably education (97). Unlike in the United States and much of the rest of the Western world, books are not as readily available in Nigeria as we may think. Transporting books for distribution has been a consistent problem for publishers due to poor quality of roads and a postal service prone to theft. Providing electronic books is an even greater challenge since the number of internet users in Nigeria is estimated around 16% of the population, most of whom access computers solely in libraries and other public spaces (“UNICEF”). Thus it is through education and admission to schools and libraries that most Nigerians gain access to books. Additionally, the ability to read is a significant factor in Nigeria where the adult literacy rate in 2008 was just 60%, and the average youth literacy rate the same year was 71.5% (“UNICEF”). Considering then that those who are in at least a secondary education program are most likely to read novels, an average of 30.5% of the population in 2008, the audience is again reduced.

Another factor for consideration is the disparity in literacy rates between ethnic groups and geographic areas. In a survey of writers about their audience, Griswold finds the general consensus to be “southerners read much more than northerners, and

Christians more than Muslims. Some put this in terms of ethnicity, saying that Yoruba and Igbos read the most” (99). Even among these tribal divisions, one must consider the linguistic ability of potential readers. Though there are some books written and published in Yoruba, Igbo, and other, less prevalent dialects, “Nigerian book publishing is overwhelmingly in English. Only books in English are accessible to literate members of all Nigerian ethnic groups, despite the fact that English is the first language of just about nobody” (Griswold 32). Nonetheless, most Nigerians speak at least some English, so the greater hurdle to overcome in reading novels is access and literacy, not foreignness of language.

Despite the evidently limited audience for the Nigerian novel, over 300 novelists have found relative success in their field within Nigeria, finding a wide audience of loyal readers, and many have won international attention for their work (Nwakanma 4). Achebe and Soyinka are among the most widely read authors within Nigeria, their novels and plays occupying a permanent position in most higher education curricula. As popular as they are, both authors struggled to find balance between native and colonial influences in their writing. Margaret Laurence explains, “Soyinka himself has remarked that some Yoruba play-goers have criticised him for being ‘too European’, while some Europeans have told him that they felt they missed many of the allusions and that a Yoruba audience must surely get much more out of the plays” (Laurence 12). As the years passed and Soyinka and Achebe both produced more works, they learned how to create this balance more effectively, allowing audiences of all backgrounds to connect with the sometimes distant references to distinct tribal cultures.

Other notable authors include Ken Saro-Wiwa, Elechi Amadi, Cyprian Ekwensi, Buchi Emecheta, Flora Nwapa, Amos Tutuola, and Booker Prize Winner Ben Okri. With the exception of Saro-Wiwa, who is renowned for his non-violent campaign against the corrupt government of Nigeria and Shell Oil Company which threatened to destroy Nigeria ecologically and economically, and Amos Tutuola who is best known for writing the first official Nigerian novel, *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952), most of these authors have limited fame. Surrounded by French-speaking countries in Africa, literature from Nigeria rarely crosses the border except when flown across the Atlantic to find audiences in the United States and in Britain. However, success solely within the boundaries of Nigeria is still enough to sustain a writing career.

Though the authors listed above cover a variety of material in their work, typical Nigerian novels tend to address one of several standard themes. Among the most popular themes incorporated into Nigerian fiction are traditional vs. colonial life, defining a tribal/national identity, and the influence of political corruption on wealth and class issues. Margaret Laurence writes, "Nigerian novelists see themselves as storytellers. They tell stories of a particular kind and with a particular intent, however, for these writers understand themselves to be bearing witness to Nigerian social experience" (Griswold 3). Seen in this light, the repetition of these themes takes on more significance in its representation of common concerns of the average Nigerian at the time that any given work was published. We see this as both Abani and Achebe hinge their novels on concerns of identity, though they set this struggle in the different contexts of colonialism and post-war tribal conflict. Achebe, though active in the Biafran struggle for independence, built the majority of his works on concerns of traditional vs. colonial life

and the Nigerians' attempt to find balance between the two without letting one overtake the other in importance. Abani on the other hand, though he mentions the British as a way of acknowledging Nigeria's colonial past, is much more concerned with political corruption and the quality of life in the slums for struggling young Nigerians. His insistence on writing about political corruption is far from a unique choice, as many other writers did and continue to do the same, but it did turn out to be a dangerous one: "As Nigerian writers became more critical of politicians, more and more writers found themselves in jail. Ironically, such opposition actually inspired Nigerian writing" (Laurence lix). Aside from Abani, Soyinka and Saro-Wiwa, among others, also found themselves imprisoned, either because of something they had written directly against the government, or for politically charged works that did not fall in line with government policy. Abani and Soyinka were among those fortunate enough to survive their incarceration. Saro-Wiwa was executed without trial on charges of treason ("Remembering Ken Saro-Wiwa"). His outspoken criticisms, and the writing which he used as a medium for his concerns, had led to his death.

The evident preference for writing over physical freedom marks a group of people who are wholly invested in their craft. For those writers who find themselves imprisoned, and even for those who just face potential social and political fallout from their words, writing is a matter of the utmost importance. Wendy Griswold explains this elevated responsibility:

Writers, and novelists in particular, stand among the optimistic-in-spite-of-everything Nigerians, while at the same time they are among the most persistent chroniclers of the contemporary political, economic, and moral problems. They express vast ambivalence toward their country, given all its resources and all its corruption, its frustrations and its potential. (Griswold 11)



This excerpt brings us back to the focus of my research: the ways in which novels can be used for peacebuilding in Nigeria. While some Nigerian novels, those by Abani especially, can take a bleak, hopeless tone about the political systems and social injustices that affect so many of his countrymen and women, at their core these novels send the message that we can strive for something better. Certainly they are ambivalent, skeptical about the means necessary to achieve this complete overhaul of the social and political systems in a country that often seems so broken, but their foundation is in hope.

#### 4. Chinua Achebe

If only one author could be credited with blazing the trail for African or Nigerian literature, there is no question that that author would be Chinua Achebe. Likewise, Achebe's work sets the standard for rehumanizing fiction in the postcolonial Nigerian world. His writing, though polished enough to gain acceptance and critical acclaim in the Western world, also makes heavy use of Igbo idioms, traditions and customs within the text, blending the best of both cultures. Elizabeth King writes, "Achebe was the first Nigerian writer to successfully transmute the conventions of the novel, a European art form, into African Literature" (King 3-4). By incorporating hints of Igbo language alone, Achebe left no doubt that though the novel is a European form, his novels are distinctly African. Achebe's writing matured with the young nation of Nigeria. He released *Things Fall Apart* in 1959 and his second novel *No Longer at Ease* in 1960, on the eve of Nigerian independence from Britain. *Arrow of God*, his third and, many claim, best novel, was released in 1964 as the disparate tribes of Nigeria attempted to sort out political control over the new country. He continued to publish literary work in between political campaigns for the next several decades, but these first three novels, linked through their setting in Igbo villages, are often considered to be the real heart of his work. While *Things Fall Apart* was the first African novel to garner international attention and is often considered the most widely read novel in all of African literature, I chose instead to focus on the more refined, less overanalyzed *Arrow of God* to give the clearest example of Achebe's efforts at rehumanization.

From the beginning of *Arrow of God*, the reader is immersed into early twentieth century colonial life in a small Igbo village in Nigeria. We are immediately introduced to

Ezeulu, the chief priest to the god Ulu in the village of Umuaro. He struggles with his power, how to best define the relationship between himself and the divine, and how to win the respect of his villagers. Early in the story, Ezeulu finds himself in conflict. The village has sent Akukalia, a hot-tempered young man from Umuaro, to the neighboring village of Okperi to settle a land dispute, by beginning a war if necessary. Akukalia reacts rashly to a perceived insult to his dignity and breaks the religious relic of an Okperi man, then kills him. In return, Akukalia is murdered, starting a war that only ends with British intervention.

Between these brash and violent scenes, Achebe describes a quiet moment where the villagers in Umuaro respond to the shock of Akukalia's death when they receive his body in a relatively peaceful manner. Their initial reaction is to work through the situation verbally:

Let us put ourselves in the place of the man he made a corpse before his own eyes.... How would the victim set about putting himself right again with his fathers unless he could say to them: Rest, for the man that did it has paid with his head? Nothing short of that would have been adequate. (24)

This scene, though brief, encourages a nuanced and compassionate view of the opponent in conflict. The villagers, though the missionaries later refer to them as savage and barely capable of controlling their impulses, first think of the dignity and well-being of the deceased Okperi man in the afterlife before they jump to the desire to fight. Rather than reacting purely out of outrage at the loss of their brother, the Umuaro develop an understanding of the situation by empathizing with the people who killed Akukalia, even as they attempt to cope with their own loss. Though war does soon break out at the encouragement of other hot-tempered young men, Achebe includes this scene early in the

novel as a suggestion that especially at the beginning of a conflict, there may be a better way to handle disputes than rushing into battle. Indeed, the rest of his novel demonstrates in ample detail the extended suffering that is a consequence of violence for the Igbo characters.

In *Arrow of God*, Achebe develops a holistic view of Igbo tribes and British missionaries and their humanity through the fallout of Akukalia's death and how it affects the relationship between the two. While tensions are still high between the Okperi and Umuaro villages, Ezeulu, who warned explicitly against starting this war, sends his son Oduche to go to school with the white missionaries in order to learn their wisdom. Having already established his will in opposition to that of the tribe, Ezeulu finds that this decision places him in even worse social standing. Most unforgivable to his people, however, is when Ezeulu testifies to the British who stopped the war by standing firm to his original stance on the war: that Umuaro should never have engaged in the first place. This is the turning point for the entire novel, as Laurence describes, "For this he is praised by the District Officer, but some portions of his own village will never forgive him, for they believe he has taken the white man's side against his own clan" (Laurence 112). As unacceptable as the other Igbo may find this moment, Achebe includes this scene to encourage a sort of self-awareness in the text. Even when they are fighting a bloody war, the people of Umuaro find the most unforgivable action to be that which favors their colonizers. Ezeulu, though punished for his beliefs, knows what is right in this situation, and refuses to pretend that his people were not at fault. This acknowledgement of fault is another aspect of peacebuilding that often goes overlooked, especially with victimized groups who have suffered at the hands of their oppressors.

Regardless of the actions done to them, it is nonetheless a key part of rehumanization of the victim to accept fault and blame in appropriate circumstances as the first step in taking agency over their own existence.

Throughout the novel, Achebe reasserts the unpopular stance of equally sharing blame between the British and the Nigerians. Through even the most unreasonable characters, he consistently humanizes the British by attempting to acknowledge the positive impact they have had on some aspects of tribal life. Early in the story, Akukalia says, "Umuru is no match for my mother's people in medicine... Their market has grown because the white man took his merchandise there" (Achebe 19). This begins the novel on a note that the influence of the white man has benefited his mother's tribe, that they are not always bad. The rest of the tribe goes on to express an opinion much the opposite throughout the story, but Achebe continues to insert these messages, insistent that his readers see the full spectrum of influence, both good and bad. Additionally, he paints the British in greater detail than might otherwise be expected. For an "other" that presents such a threat to the traditional way of life, characters like the sympathetic District Officer, who attempts to treat Ezeulu well by his standards, are given their own set of reasonable motivations, families, and even kind qualities. Laurence sums up these descriptions: "The British are exposed to Achebe's biting irony, but even the worst of them are seen as real people, men with their own doubts and uncertainties, their own need to hear cheering words, their own fears which compel them to act stupidly or cruelly toward others" (Laurence 116). By exposing audiences to complex motivations from both British and Nigerians, Achebe builds a more subtle, nuanced view of life under colonial influence,

resisting the urge to demonize it outright, and laying the ground for potential reconciliation in the future.

As level-headed as Achebe is in his criticisms of both Nigerians and British, he nonetheless writes the pain of watching a society fall apart under the influence of foreign occupation. Achebe demonstrates his rage about how Igbo society broke “by the hands of strangers who had convinced themselves that they were bringing light to a dark place, and whose self-knowledge was so slight that they did not recognise the existence of darkness within themselves” (Laurence 117). Indeed, the white men, even those who are humanized and could be called well-intentioned, seem nothing short of oblivious to the damage they cause to Ezeulu or to his tribe at every interaction, focusing their concern on procuring a chief through whom they can rule the Igbo. On the other side of the conflict, Achebe suggests the same lack of self-awareness on the part of the Igbo who, so polarized by the influence of the white man, stop addressing situations with the logic and compassion we saw early in the novel, and turning instead to taking out their misdirected anger on Ezeulu. While their feelings of betrayal are understandable, it is curious that, as King states, “[Achebe] is concerned more with the way his characters react to an already existing situation than with criticism of the white man for having created that situation” (King 195). Though extended criticism of the white man might only serve to make the conflict between the colonized and their colonizers more serious, it is another shortcoming in the thought process of the discontented Igbo that they neglect to consider what role the missionaries might play in their disagreements with Ezeulu. So blocked is their thinking by the belief that Ezeulu is a traitor and by their polarizing hatred of the

white men, the villagers lose the ability to see that he, too, is being manipulated by the missionaries and struggling to do what is best for the tribe.

As unfair as the behavior of the Igbo may seem against Ezeulu, Achebe encourages his characters, as damaged and destructive as they may be, to exert agency over their own existence. Fighting restlessly against each other and especially against the white men who control their political system, the Igbo characters in *Arrow of God*, though they choose to persecute their own priest rather than analyze the situation that traps them, make the decision to do so for themselves. Achebe, in an effort to emphasize the villagers' agency, allows the characters to do the work here themselves, "Achebe's ability to step back from total involvement with his main characters is an example of his artistry, a sign of his concern with literature as an art, and sets his work off from those who mistake literature for journalism, sociology and anthropology" (King 5). In creating this well-crafted novel, Achebe achieves his goal of allowing audiences to see opportunities for rehumanization, both of themselves and the ever-antagonistic "other," in addition to seeing the first glimmers of peace by appealing to their sense of compassion. Through Achebe's fiction, readers bear witness as Ezeulu struggles to reconcile his tribal life with the influence of the British colonizers. As the novel lives on long after Nigeria won its independence, it serves the purpose now of shedding light on the root causes of problems between white men and natives in Nigeria, encouraging peacebuilding efforts to start at the foundation in order to find some lasting peace.

## **5. Chris Abani**

As Chinua Achebe fills *Arrow of God* with the subtext of reconciliation and the chance for a peaceful coexistence through rehumanization, Chris Abani fills his works with vivid depictions of the struggle against dehumanization as a basic means of survival for his characters. In his novella *Becoming Abigail*, Abani alludes to many of the typical themes of Nigerian writing that we saw in chapter three, especially that of identity. From these, he builds parallels between British and Nigerian culture, utilizes the family unit to as a metaphor for the corrupt political system, and focuses on creating an identity for Abigail from both internal and external sources. However, the real impact of this book lies in its treatment of both rehumanization and dehumanization in explicit and almost difficult to read detail.

### **I. Background**

As mentioned in chapter two, Chris Abani wrote many of his own traumatic life experiences into his stories. Not only did these experiences provide the impetus for him to write, calling attention to the systems that damaged him over the years, but they also inform his fiction with personal suffering, making *Becoming Abigail* painfully powerful to read. Born in 1966, Abani was too young to remember any of the fighting from the Biafran War. He did, however, grow up in post-war Nigeria, struggling to overcome the prejudice against Igbos and find gainful employment. Abani recalls that in school he was exposed primarily to western textbooks that depicted western tragedies, like atrocities done in the Holocaust, but he “had no idea” about the hardships of his own people (*Chris Abani*). Simply by attending a Christian school near his home, most of Abani’s Igbo



culture was omitted from his education, favoring instead national history of Nigeria and leaving him questioning his own identity. He had difficulty making sense of the hard feelings against the Igbo people from the other Nigerians in the country and from the British people who still exerted some influence on Nigerian culture. Gradually, as he became a teenager, Abani struggled more with tribal identity as he fielded the cultural fallout of the Biafran attempt at independence. Following the war, discrimination against the Igbo was high, preventing them from holding most jobs and making decent wages. Acknowledging that those in control of Nigeria allowed, and even encouraged, his people to be treated this way, Abani came to the conclusion that he would have to create history for himself. He did so with his first novel *Masters of the Board*. As a result, he spent six years as a political prisoner in Nigeria. The first time he was imprisoned, he was only eighteen years old:

Following the publication of his novel *Masters of the Board*, he was arrested in 1985, as his work was considered a blueprint for the foiled coup of General Vatsa. He was detained initially for six months in two three-month stretches. In 1987 Abani joined a university guerrilla theatre group, which performed plays in front of public buildings and government offices. He was rearrested and held in the notorious Kiri Kiri maximum security prison. He was released without charge or explanation and returned to his university studies. His play *Song of a Broken Flute*, written for the 1990 convocation ceremony for the university, led to his final period of incarceration for eighteen months. He spent six months in solitary confinement. Abani was sentenced to death for treason – without trial – and held on death row. (Popescu and Seymour-Jones 79)

Though there were elements of dehumanization in Abani's upbringing, they pale in comparison to his extended time in prison. He was alternately kept in solitary confinement and in the main body of the prison where prisoner on prisoner violence was only barely more common than guard-prisoner abuse. As is true for many inmates in

American prisons, Abani found that Kiri-Kiri polarized already tenuous race relations. Identifying as an Igbo, he faced some additional struggles with the wardens and other authority figures in the prisons who still considered the Igbo, whose failed attempt at secession had brought so much hardship to the region, to be rebels, a threat to political order. Accordingly, his time in prison, though not far outside the average range, was markedly more violent than most Yoruba and other ethnicities experienced. He used these experiences to write a series of poems on life within prisons in *Kalkuta Republic* that heavily feature graphic violence, especially sexual violence, within the prisons, but the themes of being held captive and being trapped reappear in his fiction work as well.

After escaping his own death sentence, Abani fled to London for several years in the mid-1990s in order to preserve his own life, encountering a different kind of culture shock and dehumanization. In London, Abani found himself among a community of Nigerian expatriates and attempted to redefine himself in this new culture. Even without the turmoil of Nigeria, Abani struggled to find an identity, attempting to find remnants of tribal culture in the Western world that had always framed his life. Several years after arriving in London, Abani fled once again to the United States after the murder of one of his friends. As he continued to write and perform in plays, he continued to put his life in peril. However, in the early 2000s, Abani found safety and an audience in the American South and East Coast. All of these experiences heavily inform his fiction, most notably *Becoming Abigail* where his protagonist is taken from Nigeria to London, chased out of her home village by death and destruction that threatens her life after destroying what little family she had left.

## II. The Works

Through her imprisonment, suffering, and relocation to the Western world, following in the steps of Abani himself, readers are introduced to Abigail. When we meet our fourteen year old protagonist, depressed and obsessed with the idea of death ever since she discovered as a child that her mother died while giving birth to her, Abigail is essentially imprisoned in her own mind. Unable to reconcile her mother's death with her painful existence, Abigail is prone to obsessive, disconnected thought. From the day she was born, Abigail has felt as though she were living in the shadow of her mother, whose name was Abigail too. Her father, also chronically depressed since the death of his wife, comments often on how much she looks like her mother, and how much he wishes her mother could still be there. In one scene, Abigail attempts to take care of her father:

The first time she saw that expression she'd been eight. He had been drinking, which he did sometimes when he was sad. Although that word, sad, seemed inadequate. And this sadness was the memory of Abigail overwhelming him.... He turned to look at her and she saw it and recognized what it was. She looked so much like her mother that when he saw her suddenly, she knew he wanted her to be Abigail. (19-20)

He builds an identity for his daughter as the person who killed his wife and attempted to take her place, even if only through his perception of her. And he, broken by grief and incapable of reconciling his loss, attempts to revive the memory of his wife in his daughter. It becomes clear over the progression of the story that though he cares for his daughter and tries to do best by her, he still holds his daughter responsible for the death of his wife until the end of his life when he hangs himself in their home. In moments of diminished lucidity, when he has been drinking or is severely depressed, Abigail's father

often mistakes her for her mother. The people in her village, too, constantly compare Abigail to her mother, remarking on how similar they act, look, and talk.

Through the influence of the family and people who surrounded her, Abigail, much like Abani, is stripped of her identity by the very nature of her upbringing. As soon as she is old enough to begin to make sense of her conflicted existence, she immediately begins to cut and burn herself. She describes her self-harm as instructive, a way of growing into her own:

*Not Abigail. My Abigail. Her Abigail? Ghosts. Death. Me. Me. Me. Not. Nobody....* This burning wasn't immolation. Not combustion. But an exorcism. Cauterization. Permanence even. Before she began burning herself she collected anecdotes about her mother and wrote them down in red ink on bits of paper which she stuck on her skin, wearing them under her clothes; all day. Chafing. Becoming. (Abani 34).

This passage demonstrates not only Abigail's pain as she physically manifests her emotional suffering, but also her confusion about her identity. She struggles here for lack of a sense of self, knowing only that she is determined to differentiate herself from her mother. Abani provides these details of Abigail's troubled past to demonstrate her struggle with dehumanization. In this passage, Abigail seems to initially be having difficulty distinguishing herself from the shadow of her mother that has always hung over her. By physically injuring herself, it may seem that Abigail is attempting to destroy herself. But for this troubled character, the burns and the cuts represent her first attempts to take control over the life she has never felt really belonged to her. These attempts at independence mirror the Igbo struggle for independence in the Nigeria-Biafran War. Though the Igbo at that time came from the Nigeria they were attempting to break away from, they nonetheless started the greatest act of self-mutilation on a national scale: a

civil war. Eventually they were left to make peace and find their place in Nigeria, but the process of attempting to find independence consisted of self-harm similar to Abigail's as they both attempted to form an identity. Abigail's attempts were similarly split in effectiveness: though she never really breaks free from the reputation and the shadow of her mother, she does differentiate herself physically by exerting control over one aspect of her life for which she has been fighting: her body.

Years before Abigail started wounding herself in an attempt to create her own identity, she had already been a de facto prostitute for her family and other local men who used her for their gratification with or without her consent. Abani writes, "She had been ten when her first, fifteen-year-old cousin Edwin swapped her cherry for a bag of sweets" (Abani 28). After Edwin, a series of other men use her for sexual gratification without a second thought. Her reaction to these violations is one of hopeless acceptance, almost apathy to the abuses she suffers at the hands of the men around her. Without any sense of what is hers or who she is, Abigail is so thoroughly dehumanized that she cannot even bring herself to take ownership of her own flesh when she is young. She merely uses it when it is not being taken advantage of by those around her. The reader's introduction to Abigail's cousin Peter, who would eventually take her from Nigeria to London and force her into sexual slavery, is in his taking advantage of her at his wedding to another woman. At such a young age, Abigail seems to have no notion of how else she could respond to such behavior, other than to allow it. Much the same could be said of the Igbo who, at their earliest involvement with the British could not defend themselves against colonization, setting a tone of victimization they would attempt to end later during the civil war. As she gets older, Abigail finds other (unfortunately violent) ways of

coping with her abuse, but as a child she has only her father to look to for support and protection. Unfortunately for Abigail, her father is rendered nearly incapable of functioning from grief over the loss of his wife, so Abigail is left to adapt to the situation on her own.

Though Abigail's father's disinterest in her abuse is damaging enough to the young girl, the relationship between the father and daughter is even more troubled by the fact of her very existence. In Chris Abani's other works, most notably in his novel *Graceland*, he has a tendency to create parallel structures between families and nations. Ellis describes the efforts of *Graceland's* protagonist Elvis to make a new world for himself, writing, "Elvis's hope is to find a way out of his situation, which is one of poverty, one of brutality, in terms of the family and in terms of the state... to make a Graceland of his own, a place where all his hopes can come together" (Ellis 161). In the same way, Abani creates a situation of poverty and brutality within Abigail's family to represent the national tribal interactions in the wake of the civil war. Much in the way that Abigail's father holds her responsible for his misery, the Igbo were often held responsible for social unrest in Nigeria after their attempt at seceding into Biafra. The interactions are strained, with underlying tones of hope at resolution, and caring that highlights feelings of betrayal on behalf of both Abigail's father and the Nigerians who wanted to maintain the unity of the country.

Perhaps most importantly, Abani portrays these complex relationships without demonizing any one side of a conflict. He argues for the agency of individuals, even in the face of huge social challenges and of a history of victimization and consistently damaging interactions. Abani's *Becoming Abigail* acknowledges that it is a struggle to

create and defend an identity when you are raised in someone else's likeness. Thus Abigail, attempting to make sense of the life she has never truly lived, struggles in a way that is sometimes damaging to those around her. Particularly, Abigail injures her social worker Derek's wife with their affair. Similarly, the Nigeria Abani knew growing up overshadowed the Nigeria that was attempting to come into its own at the time when he was forced into exile. The political situation then reflected the same struggle that Abigail experience, while the Igbos who had long been victimized hurt others in their attempts to create self-sufficiency.

Throughout the novella, Abani builds all of his characters as complex, morally ambiguous figures. No one is without blame, and no one is without some hint of goodness. As Abigail inadvertently hurt those around her, her cousin Peter, undoubtedly the most villainous antagonist in the story, shows that he can be less than evil when one might least expect it. In one scene, Abigail is watching Peter as he sleeps on the train, noting, "She studied Peter as he slept. In this moment of vulnerability, nostrils flared in a snore, drooling slightly, he looked like a child... It was as if he hadn't learned to occupy his body properly. Or perhaps it was his life that he hadn't stepped into, occupying instead another one. One that was clearly uncomfortable" (77). This scene is one of Abani's most tactful ways of deconstructing the readers' binary thinking about his characters – either good or bad – in order to set the stage for reconciliation. Here, Abigail sees Peter, the man who rapes her and treats her worse than a dog, as a flawed individual, struggling in his own life when he is not causing destruction in Abigail's. Through this balanced approach, he becomes less loathsome to her, if only for a moment. While this view does not excuse his behavior, it helps to make sense of why he does what he does.

Additionally, by acknowledging that he is not purely evil, Abani makes the idea of reconciliation more attainable, suggesting that should his behavior change, they may one day find a way to peaceably coexist.

While Abani draws attention to Peter's humanity, he also reinforces the importance of Abigail's possession of free choice. He describes Abigail's reaction to Peter upon her first arrival in London: "She didn't buy Peter's story... He had done something to them, she didn't know what, but she was going to watch him closely, make sure it didn't happen to her. That was what Abigail would have done. She would have studied Peter's face too in this moment of openness so as not to be taken in by it" (77). Here Abani shows his readers that Abigail has the intelligence, the intuition, and the ability to change the path her life will take. Struggling to empower herself to take action, recognizing the danger and asserting her place in the trajectory of their interaction, even if she only does so in her thoughts, is the first step toward making this change. Certainly, she continues to fight against Peter who overpowers her physically and emotionally, but she recognizes her ability to act otherwise. Rather than being an exercise in victim blaming, this scene is included to demonstrate a key message of hope: even victims have the chance to gain some power over her existence. Abigail takes the first step in changing the trajectory of her life in London by her suspicion that Peter aims to hurt her. She takes a significantly more extreme step when, some weeks after she has arrived, after being forced to live in a freezing dog house while Peter tortures her and attempts to rape her yet again, Abigail bites off Peter's penis. This scene, though violent, is the key step in reestablishing agency over her own life.



Though Abigail grows into herself through violent means, Abani is still building the foundations for peace by humanizing both sides of her personal conflict. One of the key elements to understanding how *Becoming Abigail* attempts this peacebuilding is in the last scenes of the novella when she reacts to Derek's arrest:

They said they were doing this to protect her. That she didn't know what choice was. But she did. She who had been taken and taken and taken. And now the one time she took for herself, the one time she had a choice in the matter, it was taken away... No, she wanted to scream, no, my love, my heart. This was my choice. (117-118)

Her objection here, though clearly she is fighting against the injustice being done to her lover, is to her first real choice being overridden by forces outside of her control. After a lifetime of being used and abused physically by the men around her, Abigail has finally chosen how to use her body for her own pleasure with Derek. The greatest injustice that she faces, then, instead of the wrongs done to her in the past, is that her choice is invalidated by the government. In this way, Abani insists that the most important element of creating a new culture of peaceful coexistence for every faction involved in the conflicts in Nigeria, especially between the Igbo and other tribes, is to recognize the will and authority of each group. From there, both sides have the ability to work together within their means for peace.

## 6. Conclusion

Through studying the themes of dehumanization and rehumanization *Arrow of God* and *Becoming Abigail* by Chinua Achebe and Chris Abani, one can see the ways in which the novel is used as a medium to build the foundations for peace on a national level in Nigeria.

What we have seen in the previous chapters of work is that a popular genre in any area, like the novel in Nigeria, can be used in order to reinforce the message of rehumanization and peacebuilding. But the process is far from unique to Nigeria. In fact, Nigeria serves as the perfect example of what other countries are capable of. In Nigeria, the novel is only one part of media saturation that includes Nollywood, the second largest video production system in the world, film, soap operas, other television, a strong tradition of plays, poetry, and nonfiction in addition to novels. But dehumanization, the messages that lead up to conflict, the reinforcement of the idea that groups are separate or “other,” comes in a variety of forms as well. On one level, it would be most effective to fight verbal slurs by changing the language of the vernacular, but influencing the language and perceptions of an entire group of people is not as simple as deciding to do so. In light of this fact, media and elements of popular and high culture become useful tools for rehumanization. So it is important to consider the novel in Nigeria not as the key to building peace, but rather as a notable example of how rehumanization can be controlled and encouraged through mindful creation. Author Percival Everett said of Abani’s novel *Graceland*, “To say that this is a Nigerian or African novel is to miss the point. This absolutely beautiful work of fiction is about complex and strained political structures, the irony of the West being a measure of civilization, and the tricky business

of being a son” (Ellis 160). Though it is tempting to see literary works as addressing the concerns of a single culture, as Everett says, this misses the point and does not give the novels sufficient credit. By appealing to the common human experience, the works of both Abani and Achebe transcend the tribal and African experience, working toward rehumanization on a broader human-based level rather than one concerned primarily with Igbo or Nigerian populations.

The Nigerian experience, fighting among tribes and against the lasting influence of colonialism, is also not entirely unique. In fact, it is relatively common in Africa. But while Abani and Achebe address these issues, their message is more universal. The content of the literature that addresses African issues can vary. Even between Abani and Achebe, their treatment of humanization and dehumanization differ significantly. The most important aspect of their works, however, is that connections are built between readers, writers, and characters, encouraging empathy and acceptance of the human experience. Writers from other countries and other disciplines can utilize the rehumanizing techniques demonstrated by Abani and Achebe: humanizing the other, building an identity, and reestablishing agency. These elementary factors work in both subtle and strong ways to affect an audience without seeming preachy or overtly political. The novel thus works to build peace on several levels, from allowing authors to write their own history, to encouraging readers to see the perspective of other populations, and finally in demonstrating the ways in which individuals come to fight for their own identity. Neither Abani nor Achebe attempts to undo the suffering of the Nigerian people. Instead they highlight the struggle, encouraging readers to raise themselves up above the hardship they have experienced and to define the future from themselves.

At the end of *Becoming Abigail*, Abani ends the relationship between Abigail and her social worker with this note in the book he gives her: “Gentle Abigail, This book will show you that even though you came from a dark ~~continent~~ place, you can escape your fate” (93). While this note reflects a somewhat typical misunderstanding of Africa as one monolithic, troubled, and underdeveloped wasteland, it serves to open the readers’ eyes to other areas of conflict. Countries suffering from ethnic conflict, in particular, could benefit from rehumanizing literature, offering hope for places like the Democratic Republic of Congo (which has a small but active literary community) which is still teeters on the brink of genocide. Literature as a tool of peacebuilding holds even more potential for areas where the physical conflict has ended, but tensions have yet to be resolved, like in Bosnia which is still in the long process of recovery from the war there in the mid 1990s. The three elements of rehumanization I have outlined can also be applied to other narratives that are more suitable to a particular population, perhaps through film, plays, or other art forms. And of course, one of the most important elements that these stories offer, regardless of how bleak they may seem at times, is the message of hope that sustains individuals through the long struggle for a better life.

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