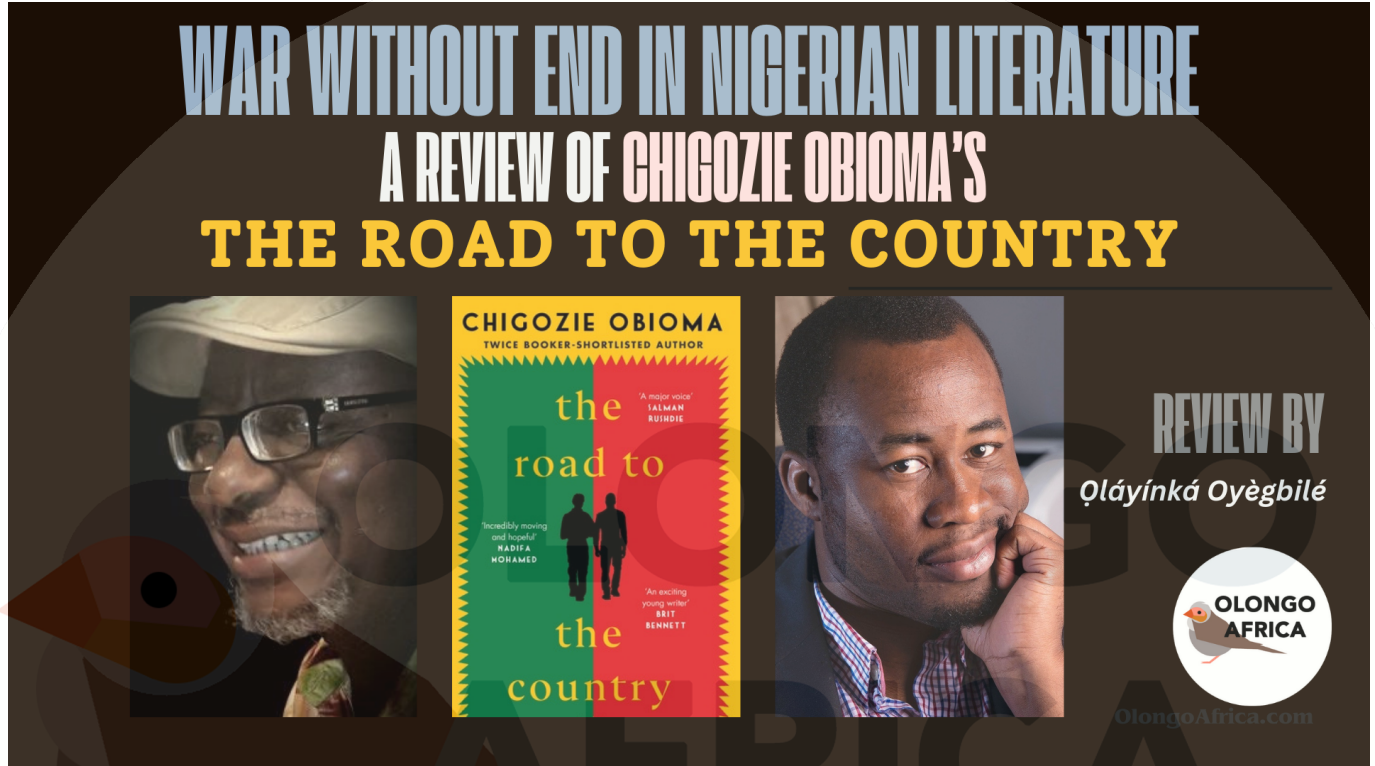


War Without End in Nigerian Literature | A review of The Road to the Country

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Only the dead have seen the end of war- George Santayana

Book: ***The Road to the Country***,

Author: Chigozie Obioma

Publisher: Masobe Books, Lagos

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The Nigeria civil war (1967-70) has produced so many literary works that it would be a surprise if definitive course (s) on the war is not already in our literature and history departments across universities in the country. Fifty-five years after the guns have gone silent, essays, stories, fiction, non-fiction, critical works and so on have continued to come out to examine the conflict and give new verdicts and insights to the event.

The interesting aspect of it is that recent works that have been devoted to the conflict are written from fresh perspectives by writers who were born after the conflicts. This have thrown out new voices that are sometimes dispassionate and critical of the experience. It is not an easy thing to write about what you did not experience, something you are only told by a second or third party. However, some of these writers have demonstrated that to write about an experience is about a deep work of research, eye for details and empathy.

It is good that the experience is making younger writers to take another look at the event because a

war is not a onetime experience that would have been roundly written about by older generation of writers. It is the reason why events of the first and second world wars are still hot issues to be written about by writers many years after.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), Uwem Akpan's *New York My Village* (2021...see my review) and Chigozie Obioma's *The Road to the Country* (2024) are therefore welcome additions to the debates and views about this unfortunate incident which the country years after has yet to recover from with agitations from all corners and with politicians who outside the corridors of power mouth the issue of taking a critical look at the state of the union but become turn coats immediately they have the reins of power.

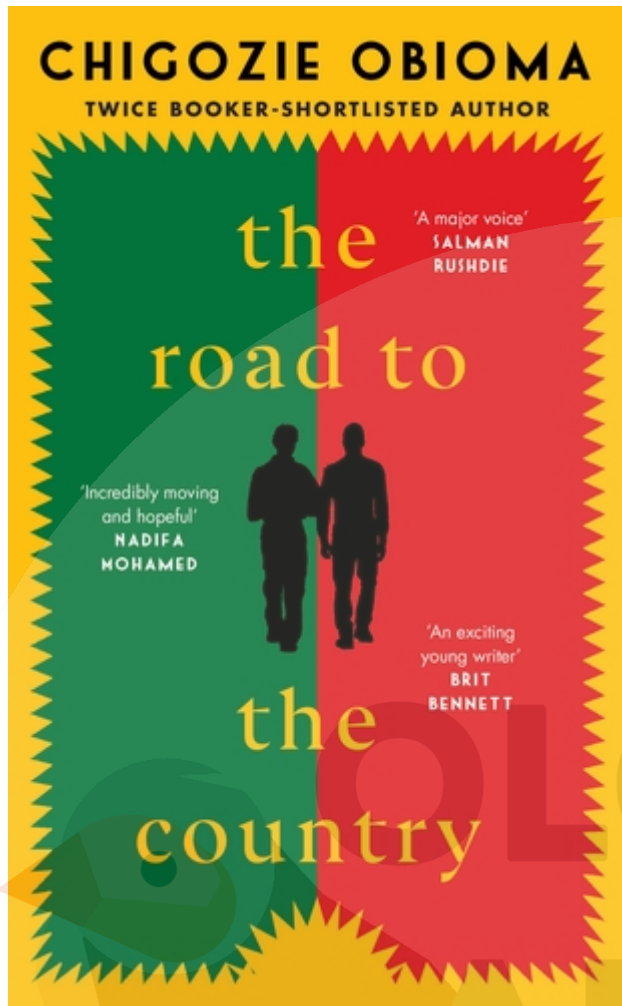
Turning to the unfortunate incident in his latest book, Obioma tells his story through the experiences of Kunle, a university undergraduate who finds himself conscripted into a war he barely understands. As a young undergraduate in the southwestern part of the country at the outbreak of the war, he ordinarily has no stake in getting involved. His school is situated in a part of the country where he could only hear 'rumours of war' and may not ordinarily feel it because it was not at the centre of the gun fires.

Leaving his campus to return home to Akure and meeting his parents, Kunle becomes agitated over the disappearance of his younger brother who has travelled to the conflict zone perhaps before the outbreak of the hostilities. The brother travelled with a neighbour and since he is nursing a wound which Kunle feels responsible for, he thinks he has to go and bring him back to his parents as a form of atonement. War scenes are not predictable and places to go and come back in whole. To realise his mission, he joins the Red Cross, the only group allowed to go to a war zone without hindrance.

He gets there and escapes from the camp in search of his brother in a region he has just scanty knowledge about. He embarks on a journey without a map. In his blind search he gets conscripted to fight the war. But the war, like all wars has its ups and downs, he witnesses some moments of friendships and agonies too. In the mish mash of the war and the attacks and air raids some of which he barely escapes with his life, he continues the futile search for his brother.

He encounters mercenaries, works with them and also make friends with other low-level officers who are all fighting in the war based on different motives and reasons. *The Road to the Country* is not all about war, deaths and agonies. In the midst of all the chaos and the desperate search for his brother, Kunle was able to encounter love like he has never known. War is not only about hatred and fire power; there are snatches of love and joy only that it may be short lived.

While searching for his brother and in the heat of the internecine war he meets and falls in love Agnes, a fellow combatant nurse. Through the rush in the bushes and the booming of war arsenals they were able to steal moments of joy. In looking for his lost brother he becomes a father. But the story is also not straight forward. Through no fault of theirs he loses touch with his love and his oncoming baby while contemplating to leave the war and continue his search for his brother.



Reading Obioma's book reminds one of Fọlá Oyèwọ́lé's war memoir *The Reluctant Rebel*. Oyèwọ́lé was a Major(?) in the Nigeria army during the war. However, he was captured and forced to fight on the side of the rebels, it is the same fate that befalls Kunle who was also conscripted to fight on the side of the 'rebels' while searching for his lost brother.

In telling this story of personal losses, agonies, victories and many emotions, Obioma deploys both his now renowned power of story telling and myths to convey the unfortunate events that led to the war in a new and gripping manner that the reader would find captivating. This two-time Booker Prize finalist has written a book that would surely occupy a pride of place on the shelf of books documenting what has been widely described as "one of the most devastating conflicts in the history of the African continent."

As the opening quote by Santayana has noted, the Nigerian civil war is far from being over with continuous agitation by various ethnic nationalities across the country. How to heal this wound is what the country is still struggling to find after more than a half a century. Can literature come to her rescue?

- ***Dr Oyègbilé is a journalist, writer and media scholar***