**Introduction**

Black Consciousness is a continuously evolving analytical approach to the in depth study of Africa and the African diaspora; one must be literate in the history of African peoples, have an identity rooted in this history, and actively seek to improve the conditions of the African diasporic community whilst leaving more to Black consciousness for the next generation to pick up. Chinua Achebe, a Nigerian writer born in 1930, has been one of African leading authors since his novel *Things Fall Apart*, a story of the true effects colonization has on a Nigerian village. His memoir, *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra,* vividly and intricately retells the story of Nigeria’s forgotten history and the Nigeria-Biafra war, a history that will not be found in the Western Hemisphere. This book enters the African voice into the conversation of relevancy and places Nigeria as the teller of the story for once. Achebe exhibits Black Consciousness through the concepts of self-awareness and its importance, the need for grounding oneself in their personal and cultural history, the influential role of women in all aspects of life, telling an unedited and truthful account of events, and creating a consciousness that can be understood and expanded by the next generation. This book transforms the perception of Nigeria and its people through elegant yet matter of fact prose that is extremely transferable into current society.

**Self-Awareness and Cultural Crossroads**

Chinua Achebe’s deep awareness of his identity, and how the complexity of his dual heritage affects his perception of his life experiences, sets the tone for this entire memoir as a journey of a black consciousness that is constantly evolving. Achebe begins the memoir with an Igbo proverb: “A man who does not know where the rain began to beat him cannot say where he dried his body” (Achebe, Introduction). Achebe takes us through the time the rain began to beat Africa, from “the ‘discovery’ of Africa by Europe…to the Berlin Conference of 1885”, and emphasizes the necessity of understanding how his identity, despite colonization, was rooted in the Igbo culture. From the brief family history, starting with his great uncle that raised his father, Achebe understood his cultural crossroads as possessive of a “dangerous potency” (8) where there is often internal warfare over which culture has precedent of his life. He talks of how the answers his father found in “the Christian faith solved many problems” (13), but where Christianity fell short, his great-uncle made up for with Igbo proverbs. It was the stories from the Igbo tradition passed down from his mother and elder sister that “were steeped in intrigue, spiced with oral acrobatics and song, but always resolute in their moral message” (9). It was this understanding of the beauty of his culture that Achebe fought for when he chose sides during the Nigeria-Biafra War.

The cultural crossroads not only affected Achebe, whose father was a converted Christian, but navigating it became the common issue for all of the key characters Achebe presents. Those in the book with a high concept of black consciousness understood how their colonized identities affected their traditionally Igbo selves, and were less susceptible to the attempts of the British. The best examples of this are the two “principle actors” in the Nigeria-Biafra War: General Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu and Yakubu Gowon. Ojukwu come from a privileged background and attended one of the leading schools in Nigeria before going off to England to continue his education. However, recognizing that it was his Igbo heritage that made him who he was, not his European education and Westernized ways, Ojukwu returned to Nigeria as a civil service agent. After the massacres that took place in January and July, Gowon was put in charge of the military. However, understanding the tensions between the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria, and understanding the British influence as a whole in Nigeria, Ojukwu identified Gowon as a “front man for the whole NPC/NNDP coalition” (Achebe, 122) two organizations that started out as independence initiatives from Britain but turned into vehicles for Britain to exploit the Nigerian resources. The fraudulence of Gowon was easy for Ojukwu to detect due to his connection and value placed in his Igbo roots. He has chosen which direction on the cultural crossroads he will walk.

Gowon was the son of Christian missionaries and grew up Hausa rather than Igbo. He then received military training in Ghana before going to school in England. When he was in England, he was a “particular favorite of the queen and other members of Britain’s royal family” (Achebe, 121). Time Magazine described him as “[a] spit-and-polish product of Britain’s Royal Military Academy” (Achebe, 121), making him the perfect candidate to assume the leader position of the Nigerian war efforts. Many believe Gowon was morally corrupt when he assumed the position, however he is just a case of poor self-awareness in terms of consciousness. Gowon’s life had been westernized since he was born; though he was born and raised in Nigeria, his parents did not do well to preserve their Hausa heritage, especially after they moved around. It is his misshapen culture that has taken precedent in his personal cultural crossroads. This made him very easy to manipulate by Great Britain. If he had a higher level of black consciousness, he would have noticed when his decisions were only hurting Nigeria as they helped Britain.

Achebe is also aware of the effects pogroms, constant warfare, and continuous fear can have on citizens in terms of mental illness. This inclusion was extremely profound considering that mental disorders of any kind are taboo and seen as weak in African nations, especially during war times. Achebe describes the coup of January 15, 1966 as a gory massacre that left Nigeria altered forever. It was seen as a “sinister plot by the ambitious Igbos of the East” (Achebe, 67) and made the Igbo open targets for those that resented them. It was a “very tense, anxiety-plagued period” that sent many people into hiding, in fear of their lives. The British aided the militant group and provided a new weapon to “attack Igbos in an orgy of blood”. Achebe says that Nigeria and its people have yet to recover from these pre-war acts, let alone the “hundreds per week” (Achebe, 69) killings that happened during war. This constant mental and physical stress played a major role in how the writers of the time entered the crying Igbo voice into the conversation. Achebe understands the importance of including this in his analysis of participants and those affected by the Nigerian-Biafra war. It is a difficult fact to admit, that one’s culture must make room for mental disorders, however Achebe’s self-awareness is extremely thorough and necessary.

Frantz Fanon is another writer that studied the important role of mental disorders in lives of war, bringing how obviously prevalent but widely hidden these key identity changers are. Like Achebe, Fanon was an intellectual thinker and a writer of the post WWII decolonization struggles many displaced Blacks, Caribbeans, and Africans felt. Caribbean himself, Fanon was born in Martinique in a black, bourgeoisie family. He accepted and studied his French history as his own, until arriving at high school and being exposed to the philosophy of negritude. Like Achebe and the other characters in the book, Fanon found himself at a cultural crossroads and chose the path that celebrated his heritage rather than European slaughtering. In his essay “Colonial Wars and Mental Disorders”, Fanon presents multiple cases of mental disorders that have manifested, altered, and harmed the lives of individuals in the middle of war. In Case Two, he presents a person who was suffered through and survived a mass murder. The person was constantly paranoid, needing his hands to be tied together in order to stop him from shooting others. Most notably, the man repeated his intention of “killing everybody” (Fanon, 6). In the fifth case, a thirty seven year old man continuously felt the urge to beat his wife and children. The patient threw himself onto his wife one night, saying to himself “I’ll teach her once and for all that I’m master in this house” (Fanon, 10), language that is similar to that used on slave plantations. Fanon points out that these disorders can be tracked scientifically and, therefore, must be accounted for when studying the personhoods of previously colonized areas. The behaviors of many people in Biafra during the war were caused by mental disorders, and not just heightened anger. The amount of massacres and their growing rate left everyone in an elongated state of shock and panic.

**Achebe’s Appreciation for History and Culture Specific Rituals**

Black consciousness is only made possible through a love for history; Achebe has a strong remembrance and sense of preservation for his Igbo culture in the wake of colonization. In He gained a pleasure for Middle Age literature from his father; Achebe grew up reading Shakespeare and the Bible. His intellectual conquests shifted when Achebe attempted to answer whether or not it mattered that “centuries before European Christians sailed down to [Nigeria] in ships” to save Nigeria from “darkness” with religion, other European Christians “delivered [Nigerians] to the transatlantic slave trade and unleashed darkness in [their] world” (Achebe, 14). Achebe sought out a different school where he could submerge himself in Igbo history. It was at his school Nekede that he was introduced to *mbari,* a phenomenological thought developed art as a form “engaged in the process and celebration of life” (Achebe, 18). It is from this school of thought that Achebe has based his writings; from writing *Things Fall Apart* to his children’s collection to this book, Achebe has repeatedly drawn from his past as well as his ancestors and their stories to give his writings life.

This practice of pulling from the past what the West has taught you to forget is known as “Sankofa”, a key component of African consciousness. Sankofa can be characterized by “as resistance with respect to rejecting Eurocentric language and world views and insisting on the relevance of using African conceptual possibilities to define and characterize African life in the contemporary era” (Temple, 128). Achebe views literature as a collective of stories, and fashions his works to be the resistance against the Eurocentric point of view that pervades in Africa. Even though there “was no African literature as we know it today”, Achebe pushed himself and his contemporaries to “challenge stereotypes, myths, and images of [themselves and their] continent” through prose (Achebe, 53). With his novel *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe uprooted the previous notions of colonization and centered the conversation on the broken communities and the painful effects the Western invasion had. In the novel, Achebe utilizes Sankofa continuously to describe the intricate details of an Igbo clan leader and his internal warfare as he grasped desperately at the last few remnants of his increasingly Western culture. Achebe believed that, in order to increase the consciousness of the world, the African voice pre-colonialism is one that must be taken into account.

**The Importance of Women**

Achebe acknowledges that the literary feats made in Africa are largely attributed to the women that bore the grunt of the discrimination whilst working to establish a voice. Achebe calls these women “griots, orators, and later writers”, establishing their presence throughout the African timeline. “Modern women wordsmiths” have spread the African identity past the continent by “boldly mixing numerous African and Western literary traditions in a cauldron, seasoning them with local color, and spicing their tales with the complexity of the human condition” (Achebe, 112). As mentioned before, it was through his mother and his elder sister that Achebe heard and recorded most of the stories of his Igbo heritage. When writing *Things Fall* Apart, if not for Angela Beattie, his British coworker, his novel would have been lost in England. As they were hiding in various houses, Christie Achebe started a school to keep the surrounding children educated and take their focus off of the war. Recognizing and paying tribute to the women that mold the minds of husbands and the youth as bombs fly overhead is pivotal in consciousness because it comprehends that women are the forces behind all of the intentions.

Everywhere, not just in Africa, women have been breaking through the chains left on them long after everyone else’s were gone. Anna Julia Cooper discusses how this phenomenon was manifested through the Church. As a result of what she calls “the true nature of Christianity”, respect for women only comes from men “for the elect few among whom they expect to consort” (Cooper, 2). Other than that, women were still forgotten about and discriminated against. Like Achebe, Cooper understands all aspects of life to be contingent on the lives of women. “Only a Black woman,” Cooper emphasizes, “can say ‘when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole *Negro race enters with me*.’” Amy Jacques Garvey points out that “many men have risen from the depths of poverty and obscurity” solely due to their mothers and their wives. Women have been an integral part of black and African consciousness from the beginning; to admit and appreciate this face is nothing short of due diligence.

**The Necessity of Pure, Unfiltered Truth**

The history of Africans has been messed with, watered down, taken and disfigured by many parties throughout time. It is because of this that Achebe’s unfiltered approach to recounting the details of the Nigerian-Biafra war is powerful. Achebe leaves no room for interpretation or bias; he tells the facts as they happened. He attempts to pull mostly from his personal experience, yet what he did not witness himself, he cites the source. Achebe tells how he “watched horrified” as Northern Nigerian officers enacted their revenge, “killing Igbo officers and men in large numbers”. In one of the most striking lines in the memoir, Achebe refers to the victims as the “thirty thousand civilian men, women, and children who were slaughtered, hundreds of thousands were wounded, maimed, and violated, their homes and property looted and burned” (Achebe, 82). Achebe does not shy away from the truth when it concerns the majority either. He exposes the United Nations for their failures during this time:

*[…] This was a calculated strategy from the Nigerians, who now had the international cloak of the United Nations under which to commit a series of human rights violations. Failing to end the protracted Biafran guerrilla offensive, the Nigerian army openly attacked civilians in an ill-advised, cruel, and desperate attempt to incite internal opposition to the war and build momentum toward a quick surrender. The vacuum in moral and humanitarian leadership from the United Nations meant that the Nigerian federal government could operate with reckless abandon, without appropriate monitoring from international agencies (Achebe, 212).*

Achebe has used his consciousness to extract the raw truth from a Eurocentric web of jumbled lies, and present it in a way that is unavoidable and undeniable. Too often are the colonizers able to hide behind the inability of Africans to articulate the atrocities they endured. However, knowing his place and his power as a writer, a crafter and distributer of African life, Achebe leaves out no detail and forces everyone to read exactly what was done to Nigeria and how.

Language like this has been repeated by Malcolm X and Sylvia Wynter. X repeatedly refers African-Americans as “twenty-million ex-slaves” in his “Harvard Law School Forum of March 24, 1961” essay, emphasizing the brutal history blacks have suffered in America. He uses terms like “exploited” and “oppressed for four hundred years” to clarify the continuous state of persecution blacks have been under. He exercises a high level of moral obligation to his people and to the future that deserve to know where they come from, another aspect of black consciousness. X also refers to white people as the “American Caucasian”, which alludes to the fact that these practices do not just occur in America. He outlines exactly who is at fault for “dividing [black people] from [their] African brothers and sisters for four hundred years, converting [them] to his Christian religion” (X, 124). Achebe and X achieve a common goal by stripping the truth of the extra fluff: everyone that reads their work walks away with a higher understanding of the history of black and Nigerian people, expanding their own consciousness.

**Leaving a Consciousness Accessible to the Youth**

From the beginning of the memoir, Achebe discusses how when the African writers began to produce works about their unique stories, there was no African literature. Achebe harps in on the importance of passing down the “great oral traditions” through prose (Achebe, 53). The practice of maintaining African works throughout the centuries, the “works of Egyptian, Nubian, and Carthaginian antiquity”, as well as others, has been an essential part in the establishment of any type of consciousness (Achebe, 53). In “Afrikan Children and Afrocentric Society” by Kunjufu, the effects of a Europeanized education system on black kids is analyzed. Because the works Achebe marvels at in his book are not taught in Eurocentric schools, children experience “significant negative self-perception and self-evaluation” (Kunjufu, 101). In these classes, African people of people of African descent are often presented as the villains, as the oppressed, and the lesser. Black kids have been “duped into thinking that to pursue intellectual excellence is to pursue a ‘white’ prerogative” (Kunjufu, 105). This must be corrected so the youth have right perceptions and the skills to access the black consciousness the elders are leaving behind. Achebe has called for the “world to ask the proper questions and draw the right inferences about what happened” to Africans on the Eastern and Western hemispheres (Achebe, 107). Achebe and Kunfuju know the younger generations can only advance if they know and have access to their histories, not just in oral stories, but in schools as well.

**Conclusion**

Consciousness is a term that is transferable through continents, cities, and homes. The philosophical concept is not solely found in the classrooms of an overpriced institution, or in the ancient speeches of the Greeks. As seen through Chinua Achebe’s memoir *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra*, many variables of consciousness can be found at different levels of a person’s understanding of the world at large. From self-awareness to the respecting of women, preservation of heritage to understanding a duality of cultures, immersing oneself in the history of their people to creating new avenues for the next generation to thrive, African and Black consciousness can be found anywhere. Achebe has provided an in depth recount of forgotten/hidden, horrific tragedies that befell Nigeria in the 1960s. His consciousness comes through his work, establishing a credible ground for his words and inviting the reader into a sad, yet necessary eye-opening to part of the world’s narrative. Walking away from this memoir, there is a sense of bitter anticipation as one wonders if there is any amount of hope that can restore a country as abused as Nigeria. Yet, there is also an eagerness to spread the story of the lives of brothers and sisters and to one day intertwine our histories.