



On Chinua Achebe as a Marvellous Writer

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In the nadir of winter on Saturday, 23 November, 1985, I arrived in Stockholm to investigate the neglect of African writers in the award of the Nobel Prize in Literature since its inception. I knew nobody in that sub-Arctic inclement part of our planet. Indeed colleagues on the Paris-based *Journalistes-en-Europe stagiaire* class had been doing their best trying to dissuade a Johnny-come-lately to the cold climates from embarking on what they, on just account, considered a hazardous undertaking. But it was, for me, a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, not to be missed.

When I heard the news about Achebe's death, I thought of that journey. I remembered some of my experiences then only faintly but there are some highlights of it that stand out as if only yesterday. The first task was to look for a place to pass the night. My main tasks would begin on Monday. By sheer serendipity I came upon a visiting Chinese called Luu who had stayed a longer period and seemed to know a thing or two about the city. And who, more importantly, was so friendly. Luu was staying in a cheap youth hostel and was willing to take me along to the place.

The Swedes had converted a decommissioned ship into a youth hostel, naming it *Af Chapman* and stationing her on the banks of the lake. It was the cheapest place my shoe-string budget could accommodate. I arrived *Af Chapman* too thoroughly tired from the hassles of the day to notice that I had myself become something of a spectacle. In the well subscribed hostel, I was the only person of my colour. The receptionist demanded my passport. I brought out the green booklet and handed over to her. She hadn't looked at my particulars just yet but she exclaimed something that I didn't understand in Swedish. But I knew she was pleased because I had never, and still never have, seen an official react with such ecstasy to a mere travelling document.

"Ah, Nigeria! Nigeria, the country of Chinua Achebe!" she followed it up in English. Never mind what she did to the pronunciation of the name. How many times in the life of a Swede does she speak Igbo? It was her turn to show me something in print too. She rummaged her daypack and brought out a book. It was an all too familiar one; the old edition of the English version of Chinua Achebe's *Things fall apart*. "It is a major set book in our

English literature class this semester,” she enthused. “Chinua Achebe, a marvellous writer!” She informed me that she was majoring in English in the Stockholm University and was temping as a receptionist in *Af Chapman*.

I told her that I was a Nigerian journalist currently based in Paris and I had come to Stockholm to do a story on the denial of the Nobel Prize to African writers, 80 years on. I would visit the establishments that were connected with the Prize and would have an interview with Lars Gyllensten, the Permanent Secretary of the Swedish Academy, givers of the Prize on Monday. When I asked her to compare Achebe or any other African writer she knew with Claude Simon, the French writer who won the Prize that year, she pouted in contempt. “I only heard the name after he won the Prize. At any rate, my specialization is English literature.”

Achebe was Nigeria’s greatest export to the modern world. And he was self-made in the intellectual or ideological sense. He was one of the few reasons the country was ever mentioned in good light. And there is a lesson in all this. In all aspects of life, social or individual, achievements that are worth the name come only when people think originally and rise above self-serving cheap fame hunt. Achebe could have got himself ensconced in the in the bountiful pleasure that life offered graduates in the late-colonial and early Independence periods, but he chose to explore something novel; something that would endure because it served a higher social purpose.

Such people are not desperate to win praises because often they are usually at a distance others are yet to reach. You can’t praise what you do not understand. They give humanity the benefit of their ideas, not minding when the rest of the society would see the sense in such ideas. In his words, Okonkwo, if occasions demanded, they would “fight alone”. They are the schoolmasters of the masses. And they are always on the side of freedom, whatever the price. As another of our great writers, Zulu Sofola, has made one of her characters say in *Wedlock of the Gods*, “It is a slave who sees the truth but ties his tongue with silence.”

Achebe put it more poignantly in a non-fictional comment that one of the foremost authorities on his work, GD Killam, attributed to him in a 1970s essay, “No self-respecting writer will take dictation from his audience. He must remain free to disagree with his society and go into rebellion against it if need be.” That is not to say that such people are infallible. They are also humans; only they are humans that have something important to tell their society or the world and they go on to do so without minding who is upset by it or who is pleased by it. Their friend, first and foremost, is truth. Often they will go on with their message even if the price to be paid is deprivation of

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material comfort, the embarrassment of being passed over in a reward that is well merited, or something worse. Achebe was denied the Nobel Prize, but so also was Graham Greene, and one or two others that should get it. The unofficial deductions that I have heard over and over again for such unfair denigration is simply that, in the case of these two at least, they were too committed in their support of the oppressed to serve the interest of the big powers.

It is natural for anyone of whatever clime who is inclined to some philistinism or a quest for crude power to avoid Achebe. Achebe was a humanist of the first water; always on the side of the underdog confronting the oppressor. It is this inclination that the less discerning misread in such works of his as *there was a country*, which in some Nigerian quarters has attracted the unfair charge of ethnicism. Any commentator who is independent minded enough to stay out of sectionalism will see that there is none of such. It just happened that the Igbo were the target of the unfair animus in the cruel real-life drama of that macabre epoch in Nigeria's recent history to which the book reacts. I have read not a few of non-fictional narratives, foreign and local (including those by important actors on the Federal side) where conclusions like Achebe's were reached. I am sure that Achebe would have written in like manner damning the blood thirsty aggressors were the Kanuri, the Biron, the Fulani, or any other group, had been the victims. Great writers who had transcended the factitious boundaries of primal loyalties are made of such stuff. Wole Soyinka wrote *The man died* although being a Yoruba. Were Mark Twain, Graham Greene, or André Gide, for example, to write on Biafra each would write like Achebe.

Just as it is true that such great writers are the targets of the powers they try to rein in, so also is it true that no truly important writer has failed in the end to secure his/her own niche in history, whatever his/her contemporaries may do. It is time that finally certifies a writer. Chinua Achebe is one of such greats, to put it most simply. His body might go the way of all flesh, but his works no doubt will live for ever.

He has transformed from a mere man to metaphor. He has become emblematic of the fact that by becoming original; by drawing from his roots, by taking reasonable pride in his tradition, the African; corporate and individually, can attain true greatness in the present world. As a quintessential teacher he created characters to show us how not to do it. Apart from the paths that are confirmed to be wrong, all others are free for exploration. We cannot be an Okonkwo and carry on as if social life were some kind of

boulder, stationary and unchangeable. We must recognize the importance of change and find rational ways to negotiate our place in it. Nor should we just jump at any design for change, like Obi does. Note that for the parrot in the cage of a bird collector's cosy portico, there is a change. But everyone can see who the unilateral beneficiary from such a change really is.

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