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Interview

There is just nothing else one can say or write about prolific Professor Chinua Achebe that has not been written before. Such is the problem in describing the literary colossus, the vibrant and incisive writer with the uniqueness of style and language all his own, the man of many dimensions, a household name in literary circles in Nigeria and beyond.

PROFESSOR Chinua Achebe, one of Africa's best known writers during a recent visit to Kaduna, granted the Weekly Star an exclusive interview. Prof Achebe in this interview discussed his works, style and language.

Prof Achebe said that "Things fall apart" has been translated into more than (40) forty languages. Some of these include Chinese, Japanese, Malaysian. Other languages include Swahili, Arabic, Russian and Africans.

In his opinion, he said that 'Things fall Apart' has a special position in the history of literature, and described it as the first of its kind and a modern classic.

Question: Now in writing do you just write to earn a living or do you write to earn academic laurels or do you write with a purpose to change society.

Answer: Well, I think it is difficult to put my motivation into any of those three categories, because I never really depended on writing to make a living. I was already working, earning as much as anybody else of my generation with my education, so I don't need any further augmentation of my livelihood and if I did need one, writing would have been the most uncertain. One would have been better advised to go into business, or become a contractor.

I don't think it is livelihood. And as for laurels how could you know before you start what was going to happen to your books and to you, especially when I was beginning, when, unlike now, there were really no writers to speak of. There were people just beginning. It was not something that we could see and say "well this is the great advantage writing has on me and on Mr A so I will follow", which younger people can do today. So it had to be a different reason and I think in my case, and in the case of every other person who is involved in creating it is a form of self-expression.

Motivation

One wants to express oneself I think that is the most important motivation, and this is a universal motivation. You know human beings. It may not take the form of writing. It may take another form. It may take the form of painting, it may take the form of dancing. You want to express yourself in motion. The important thing is you have something inside you, something burning, something that wants to come out,

something that you want to communicate to other people, to fellow human beings. So it may be a story, it may be whatever. And if you don't have a chance of communicating, you are unhappy.

It is boiled inside you and wants to come out. So it is this I would say, is the most urgent motive. This story, as you say, is historical, it is political, it is whatever. But it is a story, essentially a story, and you want to tell it, story-telling is one of the characteristics of the human species. The reasons why you do this, of course are manifold. You see, you get a psychologist if you like to give you some psychological reasons, why this should happen.

You can get somebody else to analyse it, tell you this is why somebody is telling a story. But behind it all is man in society. We have not found any other species gathering together to listen to stories. You know this is one of the attributes of man in society. You want to influence your fellows with your story. So the question of influencing society is very important, but it is not the only one.

Question: Now in "A man of the people", you are talking about it without the British influence. On reflection, how do you see them? How do you give a run-down to the lay man, of the circumstance under which you wrote those novels?

Answer: Well, I think you

By CONRAD BOSAH

question is implying the time scheme which is part of my design. It is like telling the story of people across a span of time. Taking the British presence as a watershed in the history of our people, at a crucial turning point in our history. So you situate that in the middle and you go back and look at the people before this turning point and you go forward and look at them from this turning point on.

And in that way, you get a proper perspective, as near a perspective as possible of the life of this people, what has happened to them historically, morally this is a very crucial period. Our people of course have been living around these parts for a millenia. And one can of course go as far back as one can if we have the information and so on. But it seems to me that one of the most crucial things that happened to us was the coming of the white men. And therefore the moment around that event will be very very significant and so this is what I have tried to do, to tell the story of our people through a very critical period in their history.

Follow up

Question: Now I am going to bring you back to "A man of the people." Because you treated a completely different era and a people under stress, under a particular situation. Now, in "man of the people" was it a follow-up to "Things fall apart"?

Answer: Well, this is what I am saying, that in a way, although I don't want to be too categorical in this kind of thing because having given the scheme which I just gave you, a novel is not simply a historical account. There are other factors which come into making a novel. So I am simplifying when I give the kind of scheme which I have given. So I just want you not to run away with the idea that this is the only way these books can be seen or analysed.

And when you talk about a follow-up, it is only a follow-up in specific sense. I wouldn't say that unless you read "Things fall apart" you will not understand "A man of the people" because that was not the intention. Not even "No

longer at ease" because it is more closely a follow-up of "Things fall apart".

I have situated my stories at critical moments through these periods just like as if you are focusing your camera on something which is happening over time and you look at it here and you look at it there. You get some idea of what happened to this people. For instance, "A man of the people" is about the present, at least up to 1966. But some of the causes, some of the things that happened there had their beginning in the time of "Things fall apart" in the time of the coming of the white man, the creation of warrant chiefs, and so on.

History follows, like a steam continuously. You cannot actually break it off except for your own convenience to be able to study something that is on them. But you must understand that this thing you are studying is already artificial because you have frozen it in time when in fact it is in the morning.

Question: One of the most essential ingredients in your novels is the richness of Nigerianised English. I will say it is Nigerianised because you have a peculiar and effective way of crystallising our proverbs. You don't have to be Igbo or a Nigerian to understand any of the proverbs that you have used. Did you develop that particularly for your books?

Answer: Yes, well, I did, although I don't remember sitting down any day and say, let me develop a language for writing my books. I think the crucial question here is that of language. Here we are. One of the problems which we have inherited from this early period, this meeting of our people with Europe was the coming of a language, which is not indigenous to us. The man who conquered us and colonised us also brought his language and his administration and his style of life, and everything. These are some of the problems, some of the facts of our existence. Now one of the most important of these facts is language.

Language is a vehicle for the transmission of culture and here we are suddenly given a new language. We did not lose our own yet, but our own was almost put in secondary position. Suddenly you were

'I WRITE SELF-EX'

going to make your way in the world — the new world, created by the white man, being fluent and expert in Igbo would not take you very far, you now have to learn the white man's language and so this is one of the major factors of our new life. A writer can handle the question anyway he likes. He for instance say, "Okay I write about my people about their past". Their culture is bound to come in, if you are expert writing about the matrix in which they operate, the manner in which they live, the language is crucial here.

So how do I do it? You can either go back and write in Igbo, that is one way or else you can say well, I have now got another language which we use in school and so on. So I will use that. In my case, the language of "Things fall apart", I don't remember sitting down and thinking with it, to create it first, it comes out of the story. Now I was going to write this story in English, this was my first decision. But what kind of English? Okay you start. You know, Okonkwo was a fine fellow. That wouldn't do. So what do I say about Okonkwo, how do I begin? So I think of another way of talking about him. This man is a strong man, and so on. And the language is created, as far as I am concerned by the very story I am telling.

Language

You can say something in three different ways in the English language. The man who mounts the pulpit to preach does not talk like the man who is selling tooth picks.

Question: Language as you rightly pointed out is very important. Again, another aspect of "Things fall apart", is that you find inside that the centre can no longer hold. In Mass Communication, in journalism we learn about heading the lines, telling the story. Having gone through "Things fall apart", I could easily, off hand, pick 20 appropriate headlines. How did you arrive at that title "Things fall apart"?

Answer: Well, I suppose that is simply fortuitous. I don't know at what stage in the writing I decided on the title, I don't generally begin with a title. The title sometimes comes at the very end, sometimes in the middle.

Question: So the publisher had no hand in the title?

Answer: No, no. The publishers have never chosen a title for me. It is long ago and I



Professor Excellent scholar

don't recall now, at what point but as you know, that title is not my invention. This is in fact a line from a poem by the Irish poet William Yeats. I had read Yeats in the university and I was absolutely fascinated by his poetry and I discovered also later on that in fact his own ideas, his philosophical ideas about his story, though not entirely mine, were not very far in the ideal of circles of history. But anyway, the important thing is I had read a poem in which these lines, "Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold near anarchy upon the world" one of his most powerful poems and this just seemed to me a very dramatic way of summarising what my conception, the theme of this book was.

Later on when I wrote my second novel I also wrote to another modern poet T.S. Elliot. On this occasion "No longer at ease" again a very powerful poem, a poem that had moved me immensely on getting acquainted with it and chose another title. Thereafter I didn't want any more references in classics to write on. I mean it is just a matter of my own stage of development and so on. And "A man of God" is not from anywhere, so the title is to me, the least important for the writer. But in this case I think the title was good because the arrangement don't take credit for what the credit goes to Yeats.

Question: I won't keep you

much long questions in languages. I works trans one that "Things fall apart" is ahead, head start because it is unique. But I hope to honesty be like it before so it has a history, a modern achieved in. This is say am very he it is ahead translation figures for "Things fall apart" translated languages Japanese, on. And Uganda Africa, South Africa Nigeria with my sometimes has acqu yet.

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Chinua Achebe
writer-extraordinary

know my own background is very strongly Christian because my father was a missionary and evangelist — one of the earliest peoples to train at Awka College where he spent his life with my mother taking the CMS Church and education from place to place throughout our area. So that was my own personal background. I grew up in a very straight christian family. But I emancipated myself from the narrowness of seeing the world only through eyes of this new religion.

My father did but some of his brothers did not. Certainly his maternal uncle with whom he lived although he said go and join them because this is a new thing. For me it is too late. I am an "Ozo" man. How can I go there. You see. You have to understand and appreciate the moral and spiritual integrity of some people. I don't think that God kept our people blind for thousand of years just waiting for the day Bishop Crowther will arrive at Onitsha. I don't accept that view of history.

Revelation

So I think that people had revelation of religion and truth. They had it and the practices may differ. Some may be richer than others. But I do think that we have some very rich rituals in our own religious practices. So this is why my position seems ambivalent. But I think this is a proper ambivalence. Here you are dealing with something which you cannot say "this or that" as some other superficial minded christians tend to do. I think the two can have a dialogue as I presented in "Things fall apart" a priest, a European pastor who was able to hold this kind of dialogue with the leaders of the past. Archdeacon [Barrden was one such person and he spent quite a lot of time studying Igbo religion. Even though there was such kind of condescension that you cannot help, and having studied it, if he felt his own was better, it is okay. At least don't dismiss it. I am told, in the Catholic line — Bishop Shanghai was one such person who was intrigued by what they call "pagans" the Igbo pagans and that he encountered among these people who did not become christians that he said, he was sure that he would see some of them in heaven. Which was very kind of him.

Question: You mentioned the element of fate. This is what people call God because, the pagans had their "gods" which they worshipped. Now does one have to abandon his pagan worship or whatever you call it, to be good christian.

Answer: No, I don't think so, I think religion must remain a very personal and private matter. This is why I don't go into it in any doctrinaire fashion. Even in one family, you should be able to see people of different religious persuasions. It is a question of how we react to this world of mystery which none of us has first hand experience and if there is God he has given us this consciousness in our mind, of his presence, of his spirituality, then how can you dismiss what he has given to Mr A as different from what he has given to you, this is my quarrel with the so-called higher religions. They say "we are right, you are wrong". You cannot say that. They have absolutely no right to say that. It is not even a question of power of numbers or that there are more people. If that were the answer then we should have all been like Chinese where they have the highest number. It is a matter of how this thing manifests what label somebody gives me.

What bothers me is that he does not use that label to persecute or to oppress other people.

Question: My last question. The African writers and what we call "Onitsha Market" literature.

Answer: Yes, you asked about African writers. Yes, Onitsha market literature, let me handle that, was a very interesting phenomenon. It shows the need that people have to read and to entertain themselves. We all want to be told stories. Somebody else will start creating some for himself and it is very interesting that at a point in time, people of the Onitsha market and elsewhere in parts of this Anambra area who did not have a lot of normal education felt the urge to and had this written and published and distributed.

The language was very interesting in its own way. Certainly, not the language of somebody who is looking for admission into university but for vitality which was very interesting and which was spotlighted incidentally, by outsiders than by ourselves because there was a time when this thing becomes a very powerful phenomenon which scholars are to look at and study and analyse and so on. It is very interesting period in our literary development. People hardly left their villages. They were no longer told stories in their villages.

On African writers and literature, I think African literature is alive and well and will develop with more writers coming in. Each new writer will bring his own contribution, his vision of reality and you cannot expect him to take lectures from anybody. I think that will be wrong. The important thing is writers must express their original genius. If a writer is initiating somebody else or is trying to initiate another culture this is one of the problems you see people are trying to initiate James Hardy Chase and so on. I think that kind of thing might flourish for a while but the real substantial work which must take the environment and the culture of Africa into account will continue to be written. Now you don't have master pieces every year or every week but they will come and the more writers you have, the better chances of having master pieces.

Scientific way

Analysis will say there is inequality but society will be improved if we did something about it because if we don't the people who are under the people on whose back we are riding will get angry and there will be an explosion. There will be violence. So to avoid this, society must be arranged in such a way that the cake should go round. Our society understood that. If they are sharing goat meat, they make sure that everybody shares. If you try to share it to the top people, the 'umuokorobia' will start a fight and scramble and then there will be violence so this is the thing.

This is a scientific way of working at the problems of a society. So it doesn't require going to school. But some of these people who think they are how modern have been insensitive to this type of problem and they go to church and make big donations and even build churches themselves. They are superstitious because, if religion and superstition are very close but they are different, at time religion must be concerned with compassion.

By compassion I mean being really concerned about all of your fellows, all of them, because they have problems. Not first that you give them charity, make donations to them when you remember.

African writers

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A cross section of the famous multi-million naira Onitsha market recently destroyed by fire. 'Onitsha Market' literature was an interesting phenomenon in the 80's