

## Chinua Achebe, a Mountain of the African Savannah

Review of *Chinua Achebe, Tributes and Reflections* / Nana Ayebia Clarke & James Currey (eds.), Ayebia Clarke Publishing, 2014

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After reading Chinua Achebe, *Tributes and Reflections* you're not only eager to re-read the novels of Achebe, but also all those fabulous novels and groundbreaking critical works that are under discussion in this book.

Reading this tribute to the Nigerian author, Chinua Achebe, who died last year at the age of 82, is a 'must and a feast for the brains'. A feast because the book describes in a plain but clear language – like the language of the author himself – the merits of Achebe as a writer, publisher, critic, scholar, but particularly as a human being.

It's also a feast to read the book because of the enormous variety of texts it contains: literary critical texts, praise poems, elegies and more personal, anecdotal texts about the important role that Achebe played in the life of some of the contributors of the book; texts of writers, critics, publishers, friends and colleagues; texts that

particularly highlight the novels of Achebe; articles that predominantly deal with his first and groundbreaking novel *Things Fall Apart*; texts that deal more with Achebe's personal life, as a scholar at African and American universities; texts that particularly emphasize his role as inspiring publisher of the African Writers Series of the Heinemann publishing house; contributions that dig deeper into the literary history of Nigeria in particular and of Africa in general; texts that praise the writer Chinua Achebe, but also texts that adopt a quite critical attitude, for instance the one of Helen Chukwuma on the alleged lack of female perspective in Achebe's early novels, or the texts of Ibrahim Bello-Kano and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie about Achebe's vision on Nigeria's and Biafra's history in his publications *The Trouble with Nigeria* and *There Was A Country*. Finally, there are texts that have been written

especially for this book of tributes, after Achebe's death in March last year, but also contributions that have been written at his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday, and, at the fiftieth publication anniversary of this celebrated novel *Things Fall Apart*.

The publication of *Things Fall Apart*, in 1958, was without doubt a milestone in the history of African literature, and even in literary history in general. For the first time a novel countered the biased – western - view of Africa, that was until then propagated by novels like *Heart of Darkness* (1902) of Joseph Conrad and *Mister Johnson* (1939) of Joyce Cary. Achebe portrayed in his novel, by use of a plain but powerful language, a rural society that is disrupted, that fell apart, by the arrival of the white missionaries at the end of the 19th century, and, by the different ways in which the villagers reacted to this. Achebe did this – contrary to the Négritude writers and poets before him – without any exaggerated romanticism of African rural life. Even the more harsh and cruel sides of traditional society are not overlooked. The novel is one of the masterpieces of African literature and had an everlasting influence on the literary production in Africa and on post-colonial discourse. The

significance of *Things Fall Apart* can't be better described than in the following words of Simon Gikandi on page 51:

(...) the influence of *Things Fall Apart* in shaping the literary sensibilities of African readers was unprecedented. But, the influence of Achebe's novel went beyond questions of sensibility. *Things Fall Apart* transformed the African social imaginary, the stories Africans tell about themselves, their relation to the world and their place in the narrative of modern times. It also transformed the institution of modern literature and the English language, heralding the emergence of what has come to be known as the postcolonial canon. The publication of *Things Fall Apart* changed our understanding of English and its institutions of criticism. Finally the novel had, and continues to have, an affective, almost magical quality.

*Chinua Achebe. Tributes and Reflections* offers, apart from a lot of knowledge on Achebe, also quite some information on the (literary) history of Nigeria in particular, and of Africa in general. Therefore, the book is also a must for students of African literature, for literary

scholars, and for anyone who really wants to understand Africa: connected to the contents of Achebe's novels, the 49 contributions in the book highlight an important episode in the history of Nigeria: The Biafran independence war and the succeeding starvation of the people; it describes the gradual advent of colonialism in Africa, with the arrival of the first missionaries at the end of the 19th century and its consequences on traditional African life; it tells about the dominant representation of Africa in the West; about the Négritude movement of the West African and Caribbean diaspora, that developed in Paris; it highlights the important issue of language use in African literature (African language vs. English, French...); it deals with the use of proverbs and sayings in African fiction, not in the least in the novels of Achebe himself; the volume articulates the publication of many masterpieces in the already mentioned *African Writers Series* of Heinemann. And, the book also pays attention to the literary debate of the seventies and eighties in which the so-called Bolekaja critics (Chinweizu, Jemie and Madubuike) opposed heavily against the Eurocentric vision of literary critics

like Eustace Palmer and Berth Lindfors.

In short, because so many literary issues are dealt with in this tribute, it could as well be read as an introduction to African literature and its criticism. But also more advanced African scholars will enjoy it to their heart's content; they will, for instance, like the beautiful praise poems of Wole Soyinka (p. 18) and Ngugi wa Thiong'o (p. 43) and might be particularly interested in the more tough critical articles, like the one from Ibrahim Bello-Kano (p. 112) about the mediocre quality of some of Achebe's books or they may like the contribution of Ato Quayson (p. 275), that particularly deals with the aspect of alienation in *Arrow of God* Achebe's novel (1964).

But, first and foremost, this book is a tribute to Chinua Achebe as a result of his passing on, in March last year. Many a contributor in the book poses the question whether Chinua Achebe was the real godfather of African literature. For some he is, for others he isn't. The answer to the question is, however, not that important. But there is general agreement that Chinua Achebe, as a writer, as scholar, as teacher, but particularly as human being, is one of the most important and influential Africans of the past

century. In this context, here are some beautiful lines from the poem 'Dear Teacher' of Tijah M. Sallah, on page 293:

Dear Teacher  
As we ponder your Exit;  
We know a weighty star in our  
sky has left us.  
Our bruised hopes seek your  
soaring light,  
At the edge of clouds. We stare.  
We mourn.

We will remember you for your  
dreams to make Africa fly.  
Your light to illuminate the  
untruths about Africa.  
We will remember your integrity  
and your spine.  
Dear Teacher, now that we have  
lost you,  
Someone else must bear your  
weight.  
And, now, as we ponder your  
Exit  
A heavy sadness squats in our  
hearts.  
We will not let it go -  
Until Africa awakes to your  
wisdom.

What, then, was so special about Chinua Achebe? Why has he become such a literary icon? What were his merits?

The article of Zaynab Alkali 'Reflections on Chinua Achebe'

could be read as an overview of these merits: in contrast with the western literature about Africa, or with fiction with an African setting, the common Africans recognized themselves in Achebe's books. The fiction dealt with everyday life and rituals. Moreover, the fiction of Achebe didn't over-romanticize or demonize the African continent – like *Heart of Darkness* did, for instance – but showed an African society as it was, with all its positive and negative sides. Another aspect of Achebe's mastery was the creative way in which he moulded the English language, complete with local proverbs and sayings, in such a way that as a reader you could smell, feel and fathom the local society. Achebe's creative use of the English language was a great inspiration for later African writers. Thirdly, as an enthusiastic editor of the renowned *African Writers Series* of Heinemann he launched many African writers. Further on, with his essay collections *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (1975), *Hopes and Impediments* (1989) and *Home and Exile* (2000) he laid the foundations for the modern literary criticism on African and the postcolonial discourse. His plain standpoint about *Heart of Darkness* – namely, that it portrayed an absolute racist view about Africa –

changed forever the vision on this historical novel, but, more importantly, on the colonial literature of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Finally, Achebe's controversial viewpoints about the Biafran secession war had an everlasting influence on the debate on this conflict. But, most of all, Achebe is considered as a very great, amiable and approachable, humanistic thinker and person, as the conscience of Africa. It can't be expressed more concisely than by the words of Barak and Michelle Obama:

A revolutionary author, educator and cultural ambassador, Chinua shattered the conventions of literature and shaped the collective identity of Nigerians throughout the world. With a dream of taking on misperceptions of his homeland, he gave voice to perspectives that cultivated understanding and drew our world closer together. His legacy will endure in the hearts of all whose lives he touched with the everlasting power of his art (quoted by Zaynab Alkali on page 107).

Chinua Achebe was certainly one of the giants of the African literary savannah; not a barren savannah! No, one that is abundant and rich with hills full of talent; but, Achebe was towering above these like a mountain, among other literary mountains like Wole Soyinka, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Dennis Brutus, Nadine Gordimer and others. Chinua Achebe was born on 16 November 1930 and died on 21 March 2013. But, his legacy lives on

Achebe is still alive in millions of lives

He talks to them in beautiful prose

He tells them proverbs of wisdom

He is a man of the people

A Writer of the people now and tomorrow

(Section of a praise poem on Achebe of the Kenyan author Ngugi wa Thiong'o, p. 42)

The publication of *Chinua Achebe: Tributes and Reflections*, a year after his passing on, is a milestone in African literary criticism, as it captures in a powerful and clear way the life and times of one of the greatest Africans in the past century.