

“INTERVIEW WITH CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE: CREATIVE WRITING AND LITERARY ACTIVISM”

By

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Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie will address the Women’s Caucus of the African Literature Association at a luncheon on Thursday, April 24, 2008, Western Illinois University, Macomb, Illinois, USA. The eminent new Nigerian literary voice, author of several short stories, a play, collected and uncollected poems, essays, interviews, and two novels to date, *Purple Hibiscus* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*, will speak on: “A Happy Feminist and an African Woman: Approaches to the Construction of My Female Characters.” Very kindly, Adichie has granted this interview, in order that members might get to know her better: her origins, background, literary itinerary, activities, and projects for the future. Chimamanda is also winner of many awards and nominations for literary prizes.



Azodo: You hail from the Igbo country of eastern Nigeria. Could you tell us about your parentage, siblings, and grandparents?

Adichie: My father is from Abba and my mother is from Umuunnachi, both in Anambra State. I grew up in the university town of Nsukka, where my parents worked. I did not know my grandfathers, as they both died in the Nigeria-Biafra war. My grandmothers were strong, interesting women. I am the fifth of six children.

Azodo: Why do you choose the English language as the medium of your expressive writing? What is your view on the use of indigenous languages by African fiction writers? Would you ever consider writing in the Igbo language?

Adichie: I'm not sure my writing in English is a choice. If a Nigerian Igbo like myself is educated exclusively in English, discouraged from speaking Igbo in a school in which Igbo was just one more subject of study (and one that was considered 'uncool' by students and did not receive much support from the administration), then perhaps writing in English is not a choice, because the idea of choice assumes other equal alternatives.

Although I took Igbo until the end of secondary school and did quite well, it was not at all the norm. Most of all, it was not enough. I write Igbo fairly well but a lot of my intellectual thinking cannot be expressed sufficiently in Igbo. Of course this would be different if I had been educated in both English and Igbo. Or if my learning of Igbo had an approach that was more wholistic.

The interesting thing, of course, is that if I did write in Igbo (which I sometimes think of doing, but only for impractical, emotional reasons), many Igbo people would not be able to read it. Many educated Igbo people I know can barely read Igbo and they mostly write it atrociously.

I think that what is more important in this discourse is not whether African writers should or should not write in English but how African writers, and Africans in general, are educated in Africa.

I do not believe in being prescriptive about art. I think African writers should write in whatever language they can. The important thing is to tell African stories. Besides, modern African stories can no longer claim anything like 'cultural purity.' I come from a generation of Nigerians who constantly negotiate two languages and sometimes three, if you include Pidgin. For the Igbo in particular, ours is the Engli-Igbo generation and so to somehow claim that Igbo alone can capture our experience is to limit it. Globalization has affected us in profound ways.

I'd like to say something about English as well, which is simply that English is mine. Sometimes we talk about English in Africa as if Africans have no agency, as if there is not a distinct form of English spoken in Anglophone African countries. I was educated in it; I spoke it at the same time as I spoke Igbo. My English-speaking is rooted in a Nigerian experience and not in a British or American or Australian one. I have taken ownership of English.

Azodo: Could you tell us about your literary itinerary, that is, your beginning, where you are at now, and where you are going in the future with writing?

Adichie: I've been writing since I was old enough to spell. I fell in love with books as a child and writing remains the only thing I find truly meaningful. I cannot speak about where I am going in the future because I like to think that I will know when I get there.

Azodo: You manifest interest in various aspects of Nigerian life—politics, economy, ethnicity, language, religion, communication, morality, sexuality, etc. What motivates your activism in these domains?

Adichie: I'm not sure I can consciously analyze the roots of my interest. One just happens to be interested in things, I suppose. I am a very keen observer of my world and my experience as a Black African woman clearly plays a role in the things that interest me. In the end, it is human beings that I care about and the idea of what it means to be human that interests me.

Azodo: Do you have projects in progress now, and what is in the horizon in the short and long terms?

Adichie: I do have a novel in progress but, being the unreasonably superstitious Igbo woman that I am, I would rather not talk about it.

Azodo: What can one do to preserve one's linguistic patrimony from erosion in the context of a globalized world? What could scholars and creative artists do, severally or conjointly, in the case of Nigeria?

Adichie: This is a question I hear often and ponder often. I would say the first step is to start at home. To teach our children our languages. I am amazed by the number of African academics who teach and write about this sort of thing but whose children do not speak their languages. I am very interested in what happened to us Africans. My father was a PhD student in the US in the early 1960s. When my mother had their first daughter, my parents decided to speak only Igbo at home, to make sure she knew her language because they knew she would learn English at school. Now, forty years later, that daughter of theirs has a son who does not speak Igbo and is not encouraged to.

Some middle class Nigerians tell me that their children will be 'confused' if they speak both languages. I find this amusing. I certainly was not confused growing up bilingual.

I think that, beneath these superficial reasons, there are deeper questions of self-esteem and fundamental pride in who we are.

Azodo: Thank you very much, Ms. Adichie.

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NOTES: [For fuller accounts on primary and secondary sources, see the following URL, Copyright 2004-2007 Daria Tunca, <http://www.l3.ulg.ac.be/adichie/>]

Literary Awards:

Among Adichie's many literary awards and nominations include the following:

- BBC Short Story Competition 2002 joint winner, for 'That Harmattan Morning'
- O. Henry Prize 2003, for 'The American Embassy'
- David T. Wong International Short Story Prize 2002/2003 (PEN Center Award), for 'Half of a Yellow Sun'
- Hurston/Wright Legacy Award 2004 (Best Debut Fiction Category), for *Purple Hibiscus*
- Commonwealth Writers' Prize 2005: Best First Book (Africa), for *Purple Hibiscus*
- Commonwealth Writers' Prize 2005: Best First Book (overall), for *Purple Hibiscus*
- Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards 2007 (Fiction category), for *Half of a Yellow Sun* (joint winner with Martha Collins, for *Blue Front*)
- PEN 'Beyond Margins' Award 2007, for *Half of a Yellow Sun* (joint winner with Ernest Hardy for his essay collection *Blood Beats, Vol. 1*, Harryette Mullen for her poetry anthology, *Recyclopedia*, and Alberto Ríos for his poetry collection, *Theater of Night*)
- Orange Broadband Prize for Fiction 2007, for *Half of a Yellow Sun*
- Woman Booker prize for *Half of a Yellow Sun*, 2007.

Nominations:

- Short listed for the Caine Prize for African Writing 2002, for 'You in America'
- Runner-up in the Commonwealth Short Story Competition 2002, for 'The Tree in Grandma's Garden'
- Short listed for the Orange Prize for Fiction 2004, for *Purple Hibiscus*
- Long listed for the Booker Prize 2004, for *Purple Hibiscus*
- Nominated for the YALSA (Young Adult Library Services Association) Best Books for Young Adults Award (2004), for *Purple Hibiscus*
- Short listed for the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize 2004/2005, for *Purple Hibiscus*
- Nominated for the 33rd Annual National Book Critics Circle Prize (2006), for *Half of a Yellow Sun*
- Short listed for the Commonwealth Writers' Prize 2007: Best Book (Africa), for *Half of a Yellow Sun*
- Nominated for the British Book Awards 2007, category 'Richard & Judy Best Read of the Year', for *Half of a Yellow Sun*
- Nominated for the James Tait Black Memorial prize 2007, for *Half of a Yellow Sun* (winner to be announced on 25 August 2007)

SHORT BIO-BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Biography:

Date of Birth: September 15, 1977

Place of Birth: Enugu, Anambra State, Nigeria

Home Town/Natal Village: Abba, Anambra State, Nigeria

Parentage [Father]: James Nwoye Adichie, retired Professor of Statistics, University of Nigeria, and former Deputy Vice-Chancellor, University of Nigeria

[Mother]: Grace Ifeoma, Adichie, retired Registrar, University of Nigeria, Nsukka

High School Attended: University of Nigeria, University School, Nsukka

University Attended: Drexel University, Philadelphia [first 2 undergraduate years]

Eastern Connecticut State University

Degrees Earned: B. A., 2001 [Communications and Political Science] Eastern Connecticut State University

M. A., 2003 [Creative Writing] Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore

Postgraduate Studies [continuing]: African Studies Program, Yale University

Bibliography:

For Love of Biafra (play). Ibadan, Spectrum Books, 1998.

Decisions (collected poems). London: Minerva Press, 1998.

Purple Hibiscus (novel). Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 2003.

Half of a Yellow Sun (novel). London: Fourth estate, 2006.

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