

# “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?



**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)

