

# ‘Arrow of God’ over ‘Things Fall Apart’



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By **TONY ELUEMUNOR**

## IN SUMMARY

- Tony Eluemunor, a former student of the late literary icon, remembers his advice: “The world is your stage,” he announced: Reach out and take it. Tackle it, subdue it. I’m just your guide. Soon, you’ll forget me and open your wings and fly.”
- As Achebe’s former student, the question I have faced the most is this: “How did he teach his books?” My unvarying answer has been this: “I wish I knew”. Because Achebe never taught his books.

The University of Nigeria Literature 301 (African Fiction) Class was three weeks late in starting for the 1980/81 academic year. Then in the fourth week, the students had gathered as usual even before the class was due to begin.

Five minutes after the time, a large ash-coloured Mercury Monarch drove into the car park beside the class. A man of middle height in a brown safari suit and with a deeply creased and very serious face but erect body walked in.

He greeted the class and went straight to perch at the edge of the table, disdaining the chair — and waited for the murmur his entry had elicited to die down. It didn't. Two minutes later he cleared his throat, went to the blackboard and began to write even as he spoke: "My name is..." and the class roared: "C-H-I-N-U-A A-C-H-E-B-E!!!"

He shook his head ever so slightly, like somebody who had become used to such antics, nay adulation, and reminded the class that other students were also taking lectures in other sections of the Ansah Building, which the English Department shared with Economics.

Then he apologised for having not been in the country for three weeks now, forcing the students to miss lectures. He explained that international engagements were making more demands on his time and he had decided to do something about his having to struggle to meet up with his lectures. With that he had hinted that that would be his last class in Nigeria ... but that master of understatement did not make it that clear.

He asked if we had all bought the long list of textbooks, and he added another long list; the class asked if we would ever have the time to read all of them. No, he spoke ever so softly, so softly that you sometimes had to strive to hear him, saying that your studies would neither began nor ended in the classroom.

"You have to go beyond the official list of books. "The world is your stage," he announced: Reach out and take it. Tackle it, subdue it. I'm just your guide. Soon, you'll forget me and open your wings and fly."

Achebe was ever patient; never shouting, his temper under control; not even when students gave the worst of answers. Instead, he would say, "Why not look at it this way?"

There was a particular student, Tony Ejiochi, who loved to antagonise Achebe, telling him often that he rated the late Nigerian children's writer, Cyprian Ekwensi, as Africa's best. Achebe thanked him for the stance, especially for his courage, but warned him that his style of writing, filing the entire essay with "phantasmagoria" and other such high-falutin words just to make an impression, would not help him in making the world appreciate Ekwensi the more.

"I wonder if Ekwensi ever used the word phantasmagoria in any of his books," concluded Achebe. From that day, "Phantasmagoria" took over as the student's name. If I see Ejiochi tomorrow, I'll still call him "Phantasmagoria."

Then one day, Achebe flared up. He had asked the class to read a certain section of the Senegalese diplomat, Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *The Ambiguous Adventure* as preparation for the next class discussion. The class went smoothly until somebody asked Achebe the meaning of the word "Occident."

Achebe went back to his seat (the table's edge really), then asked the student to stand up, and then roared: "What is your dictionary for? This is 'terrible' (his favourite word for describing a bad situation). You are not ready for the task at hand if by now you have not fallen in love with your dictionary. Don't you know that Ngugi (wa Thiong'o) wrote his great novel while he was still a student? Oh, you are laughing? That is terrible!" Then the entire class laughed and he turned to us: "Why are you laughing at tragedy?"

From there began the class's great love affair with Ngugi Wa Thiong'o. Before Achebe would teach any book, he would spend hours on the novelist, his society, the time in which he wrote and lastly, he would say "When I met him..."

It was clear from the time he spent on East African history that he had great respect for the Mau Mau uprising, especially its organisation. The result was that Ngugi became the class's favourite author. Every discussion session was filled with Ngugi and East Africa plus Meja Mwangi's *Carcase for Hounds*; it was clear Achebe greatly admired "Gen" Dedan Kimathi. Once he admonished the class: "You are asking too many questions about Ngugi, I may need to get him here to answer the questions himself." The class went delirious! But we took it as a joke — until Ngugi arrived!

Understandably, he made us take great interest too in South African literature. The question will always resonate whenever our former class members gather: “Is we not people?” That came from Alex La Guma’s *A Walk In The Night*. To Achebe, that was all that mattered: The humanity of the African that has been denied by others.

“To us, the “rotten” English of that unschooled black ghetto dweller on the run from the apartheid policemen made the question more memorable! Then talking about when he met Nadine Gordimer, he chuckled and said she was in tears because “young hotheads” had refused to allow her to attend a conference of African authors in Kenya.

Achebe took her into the hall and convinced the others that the lady had been writing against the apartheid system and she lived in Africa.

“We need to swallow up all the whites in South Africa because from the Cape to Cairo belongs to us by divine right, and know that when South Africa becomes free, some whites will elect to remain there,” he argued. Her tears dried up immediately.

Achebe opened our eyes to the African world. He loved to quote this passage from *The Ambiguous Adventure*: “Instead of picking and choosing what to accept from the West and what to reject, Africa is acquiver with courteousness, metamorphosing in a space of one generation under this new egotism which the West is scattering abroad.”

To him, arts must be in the service of the society and that should continue until we could take for granted what the West now takes for granted (a push-button life of leisure) “art for art’s sake” would remain a “deodorised dog shit,” to quote his exact words.

As though Achebe were keeping his house in order before embracing more global engagements, he packed much into the 1980/81 season. Thus he organised the Okochi (dry season) Festival to which he invited storytellers from the villages, in an attempt to make the university recognise the real oral literature.

The vernacular recitals took place under the full moon in the open-air Princess Alexandra Building — its roof was destroyed by bombs during the 1967-1970 Nigerian Civil War and the university decided to keep it that way as a war relic.

Achebe later told me in Upstate New York, US, over a decade later, that his final duty before leaving Nigeria was to organise the Association of Nigerian Authors in 1981. “I had to keep my house in order,” he said.

Emeka Atamah and I served as the only members of the conference's secretariat. Its special guest was, yes, Ngugi. For Ngugi's address as a special guest of honour, the hall was jam-packed. I remember the last question he answered: "In what way should established writers help aspiring ones?"

He said in every way possible; that he himself was helped too. He recalled that, after a Nigerian novelist had spoken to Makerere University students; he went to show the novelist a manuscript. When he came the following morning to collect the manuscript, the novelist told him he had already packed it in his suitcase: "You will hear from my publishers. I read a bit of it but I did not finish it, which is a shame really."

Then Ngugi looked up before announcing that the novelist was Achebe and the manuscript became *Weep Not, Child*. As the clapping died down, he concluded: "So I must pay homage to my literary father." And he went to shake Achebe's outstretched hand.

So, was Ngugi his favourite African novelist? He shook his head left and right and left again when I asked him that question in the US, where he lived after the 1990 car accident that rendered him wheelchair-bound — he was on his way to the Airport to catch a flight for another international conference.

He said that if there was a book he never got tired of reading, it was Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure*. Why? He said the book was a philosophical dialogue between Africa and the West. "Look, Tony, it is there in the book that many Africans, often the brightest and the best that we send to the West to understand the Western ways and so help us in the fight for the world's resources are often conquered by the 'itinerary itself.' It is written there that many such people never really return to Africa and end up neither whites nor blacks but hybrids filled with shame."

He continued, "Many now in the US, will never return to Africa, neither will their children."

Achebe himself never returned, he died there ... but did he bother about such things? On my second visit to him at Bard College, Annandale in Hudson, Upstate New York, he told me that he was in a hospital bed in London (after his 1990 car accident) thinking how he would have to remodel his house in Ogidi, south-west Nigeria now that he was wheelchair-bound, when a visitor was ushered in.

He was the president of an American college. He asked if Achebe would be ready to move in as part of the faculty once he was ready to leave the hospital. Achebe said, yes, for he did not want the incapacitation to end his productive life.

On getting to the US, the purpose built “Achebe House” was ready, overlooking the Catskill Mountains that reminded one of the Nsukka Hills, beside Achebe’s former University of Nigeria, Nsukka. He told me he could use his wheelchair to navigate all through the house and the entire campus. But would the situation be the same in Nigeria? He answered the question in an Achebe way: “Nigeria is a sorry story.” I did not fail to note the understatement once again.

One question many have asked is if Achebe regretted that he never won a Nobel Prize in Literature. I asked him that question and he said, understatedly once again, “I do not lose sleep over that.”

For a while, I harboured the fear that Achebe could actually reject the prize to thumb his nose at the West as he twice rejected national awards from Nigeria — for failure of leadership. But now, that will remain one of the great unknowns of history; why he was not thought fit for the prize and if he would have accepted it.

Yet it remains a fact that in 1986, African writers were invited for a seminar in Sweden of all places. Achebe not only turned it down, he published an article saying that the place to discuss African literature was in Africa or a foreign place where African literature was taken seriously.

Chinweizu (of *The West and the Rest of Us* book fame), the polyvalent scholar who studied Maths and Philosophy at Massachusetts Institute of Technology before taking a PhD in History and branching off into American Economy and writing literary criticism books, etc, then alerted the world that Achebe had by that act written himself out of the Nobel Prize. That year, another Nigerian, Wole Soyinka, became a Nobel laureate.

Yes, could he have lived only on the earnings from his novels? He said an emphatic yes to that. Did critics bother him? No, he replied “They almost all say nice things about me — and then you have to realise that there are some lunatics out there. You have to learn to notice the serious ones, weigh what they have to say, for no one is perfect. But some are just lunatics.”

Many may be disappointed to learn that Achebe rated his *Arrow of God* above *Things Fall Apart*. He said that a man’s books are like his children and people never really announce that they love one child above the others. But a book of his he was likely to be found re-reading was *Arrow of God*. To him, Eze-Ulu, the protagonist, has more grandeur than the impetuous Okonkwo of *Things Fall Apart*. And is Okonkwo’s Umuofia a real village? No, is the answer — like Okonkwo, it is pure fiction.

As Achebe's former student, the question I have faced the most is this: "How did he teach his books?" My unvarying answer has been this: "I wish I knew". Because Achebe never taught his books. Prof Emmanuel Obiechina taught my class *Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God*, etc. But sitting with him years later in the US, he answered my questions easily: *Things Fall Apart* did not render an idealised picture of the Igbo of that era. You could almost say that it was a harsh, even wicked, society. But, and he smiled, as you supplied the rest: We were not just savages and the white man, acting on God's behalf saved us. The truth must lie somewhere in between, but until the lion begins to tell its own stories, the story will always be told by the hunter.