

An Interview with Chika Unigwe

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Chika Unigwe was born in Enugu, Nigeria, in 1974, and now lives in Turnhout, Belgium. She is best known for her three novels: The Phoenix (2007), On Black Sisters' Street (2009) and Night Dancer (2012). These books, which explore themes such as migration, loneliness, prostitution and gender relations, were originally written in English but, unusually, were first published in Dutch translation, which has contributed to establishing Unigwe (who occasionally writes in Dutch) as one of the most prominent figures of African descent on the literary scene in Belgium and the Netherlands. The author has won several prizes for her fiction, including the 2003 BBC World Service Short Story Competition for 'Borrowed Smile' (published in Wasafiri 39, Summer 2003); another short piece, 'The Secret', was shortlisted for the Caine Prize in 2004.

The following interview took place on 4 May 2012 at the University of Liège, Belgium.

Question Your first novel, *The Phoenix*, tells the story of Oge, a young Nigerian woman who lives in a small town in northern Belgium where she feels lonely and isolated. You have often said that the book was not autobiographical – indeed, the character's circumstances are quite different from your own. But how much of your personal experience of Belgium went into that first novel?

Chika Unigwe Loneliness definitely played a role. I think migration goes hand in hand with loneliness, because you leave everything you are used to, and you move into a space where absolutely everything is new, at least in my case: I had to learn a new language, I had to get used to the social etiquette. Nothing I knew before I moved to Belgium mattered anymore. So my character's sense of visceral loneliness is one I also experienced. Even my [Belgian] husband never understood the depth of my loneliness, no matter how much he tried, because he was home, in his own comfort zone. For example, when his relatives came to visit, they would all speak in Dutch. At the beginning, he would patiently translate every sentence into English, but then at some point he would be drawn into the conversation and would forget to translate. And I would just stand at the side; I was there but I wasn't. It is the same with my protagonist, Oge. In the novel, the character has been diagnosed with cancer, but she can't

bring herself to tell her husband, because she lives in a totally different world. In many ways, writing the book was cathartic for me; it allowed me to get rid of that loneliness and pass it on to someone else.

Q The writer Caryl Phillips, who wrote a blurb for *The Phoenix*, described the novel as 'eloquent on the subject of loneliness, which may well be our modern European condition'. Do you agree that loneliness is necessarily a European condition?

CU I guess it is European in the sense that, at least in western Europe, people are becoming more and more individualistic, and there is a certain sort of loneliness attached to that. In Belgium, I once saw an eighty-year-old woman standing on her doorstep with a flask of tea, asking passers-by to help her open it. No one would even look at her, because people were too busy minding their own business. I stopped to help her, and at that moment I thought you have to be terribly lonely to stand on your doorstep with a flask, waiting for strangers to help you. It was very moving.

Q Late on in *The Phoenix*, it is revealed that the character's sense of isolation is actually compounded by grief. Is death also a theme that played on your mind while you were writing the novel?

CU Yes. The first month I was in Belgium, one of my husband's elderly relatives passed away. After that, every time the phone rang, I feared it was to let me know that one of my own family members had died. This made me wonder: how do you cope with grief in a foreign tongue, in a foreign country? I mean, you can love in a foreign language, and love in a foreign country, but grieving takes you completely back to your roots, to the core of your being. It lays you bare. And if you're not rooted, you can't really grieve properly. Funerals are striking in that sense. My husband's relative died when my parents and two of my siblings were visiting from Nigeria. We all went to the funeral and were wondering what on earth was going on there. It all seemed so odd. In Nigeria, when somebody dies, there has to be an outward show of grief; you can't simply sniff silently into your handkerchief. You don't have to shed tears, you just have to make noise. And there we were in Belgium; there was no noise, everyone was either completely quiet or crying silently. After the ceremony we sat at a table and had coffee and sandwiches, and my mother said, 'Wow, this is really weird!' So I imagined that if I were in Belgium and one of my family members were to die, I couldn't

scream and lash out like I'd want to, because it is not done; your grief has to be contained. *The Phoenix* was all about exploring this; how do you handle grief when you're constrained by the social context, when you can't grieve as you would by nature?

Q Has your perception of Belgium changed since you wrote *The Phoenix*? If you were to write the novel now, would it be the same?

CU The loneliness has eased a little because I have a certain command of Dutch now. Language is very important when you migrate. When you can't operate in the language of the place where you are living, you remain on the periphery, at the margins. I would say that I'm still lonely here, but it is a different sort of loneliness. The intensity is different. So maybe, if I were to write *The Phoenix* again, there might be some differences. I don't know.

Q Your second novel, *On Black Sisters' Street*, follows four African prostitutes working in Antwerp. What inspired you to write this book?

CU I come from a very conservative Catholic home. When I was growing up, we had a large Sacred Heart of Jesus poster in the living room. If we had male visitors, the only couch that my four sisters and I were allowed to sit on was the one directly underneath that huge Sacred Heart of Jesus, because we couldn't do anything naughty there [laughter]. Sex wasn't a word we could use. I loved Salt-n-Pepa's song 'Let's talk about sex', but I could never bring myself to sing it aloud unless I replaced sex with something else, like bread [laughter]. Sex was such a dirty word. Then, after I moved to Belgium, I made a journey by train from the north of the country to Brussels, and I remember passing through Brussels North and seeing all the prostitutes in the display windows. It struck me that here was a place where sex was not only very openly talked about, but was also openly up for sale. That was one of the first cultural shocks. And when I realised that many of the African prostitutes in Antwerp were from Nigeria, I became really curious. *On Black Sisters' Street* was my way of answering all the questions I had. It was a book I wrote to satisfy my own curiosity.

Q The novel offers thought-provoking reflections on issues related to gender and sexuality. On the one hand, female sexuality is presented as being exploited by men – the most striking case being that of Alek, the Sudanese character who is forced into prostitution – but on the other hand, the three Nigerian protagonists, Sisi, Ama and Efe, choose to become sex

workers. Would you agree that these three women are depicted as having more agency than Alek?

CU I'm always very careful when I talk about choice in relation to what these girls end up doing. When I was writing *On Black Sisters' Street*, I went to Antwerp's red light district to do research, and eighty to ninety per cent of the Nigerian women I spoke to knew what they were coming to do in Belgium. So in a sense they had decided to come. But these are also people who do not have any other options – it is very difficult to talk about agency and choice under these circumstances. One of the most shocking stories I heard was about an auction house in Brussels where Nigerian girls are sold. The girls would bribe band managers in Nigeria to be added to the list of band members and enter the country this way, knowing they were going to be sold and hoping to be bought. It was very difficult for me to get my head around the fact that a woman would choose to bribe someone to bring her over to Europe and be paraded naked. And not being bought is seen as a failure. So yes, it is a choice they've made, but they've only made it because they didn't have alternatives available to them. When I was writing the book, I had to redefine for myself what the parameters of choice were. Perhaps Alek was indeed forced into prostitution, but the other girls were also forced into it by circumstances. In a way they're all as much victims as Alek.

Q It is quite striking that even when the four protagonists in *On Black Sisters' Street* make questionable decisions, the book never seems to be critical of the women themselves, but rather of the society in which they live. Did you consciously try to avoid judging your characters?

CU The first draft I wrote of *On Black Sisters' Street* was completely different from the final manuscript. Three of my good friends, who are also writers, read the first version, and one of them said, 'These girls of yours don't sound very authentic; they sound like a journalist's view of what prostitutes are like.' This friend encouraged me to go out into the field. So I went to the red light district in a miniskirt and high boots and as soon as I started talking to the girls, I began to completely unburden myself of whatever views I had of prostitutes. Preconceived notions were going to get in the way of how I saw these women, so I decided to simply let their stories be projected onto a completely blank screen. It was a lot easier to write balanced stories this way. But also, the more I spoke to the women, the less judgemental I became, because I started seeing them as human beings in whose shoes I could easily have

been, had I been born into a different family. And, I've said this several times, one of the lessons I learned from talking to them is that shame is a huge luxury. You can afford to have shame if everything is going your way, if you don't have to send money to your parents. Many of these girls' families are completely dependent on them. One of the girls asked me, 'If your father were diabetic and could not afford to buy his medicine but *you* could do it for him, would you?' This completely changed the way I looked at these women or the way I listened to their stories.

Q The novel establishes a clear parallel between prostitution and the transatlantic slave trade, for example by featuring the auction house you mentioned earlier. But it seems the women you portray can also be perceived as warriors of sorts – the epigraph to the novel, taken from Brian Chikwava's short story 'Seventh Street Alchemy', contains the phrase 'armed with a vagina'...

CU One of the things the girls will tell you is that prostitution is just a transitional stage, a means to an end. They tell you everything is for sale, even husbands. In a capitalist world, the money they earn gives them a lot of independence, a lot of power, so your 'warrior' statement is entirely correct. In a sense, these women become culturally male in societies where men have all the power and all the money.

Q The female protagonists depicted in your novel are not only independent individuals but, from a literary perspective, they are also fully fledged, three-dimensional characters, unlike perhaps the women found in early Nigerian novels like Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Is this strong female presence to be interpreted as a sign of progress in Nigerian literature?

CU *Things Fall Apart* came out in 1958. Achebe was writing about a particular culture, and he was writing back to the empire which had emasculated Nigerian men. It was a conscious decision on his part to recreate a culture where men were very important, because he was trying to redress a particular situation. Then, eight years after *Things Fall Apart* was released, Flora Nwapa published *Efuru*, which featured very strong female characters. In a sense, Nwapa was writing back to Achebe's women, so the redressing of perspectives that you allude to has been going on for decades. I don't know if the presence of four female protagonists in my book is to be seen as a sign of progress. It simply shows there are different facets to migrant literature written out of Europe about Africans – the stories of these four

women are as valid as the stories of regular migrant workers or as Oge's tale in *The Phoenix*, who is dealing with the loneliness of living away from home.

Q Since you wrote *On Black Sisters' Street*, the media have tended to consider you an expert on the subject of prostitution. Only recently, the *New York Times* asked you to give your opinion on the legalisation of the sex trade. How do you feel about this?

CU [Laughter] It is weird, but these things happen. The same week the *New York Times* contacted me, I received an email from the New York Public Radio, also asking me to join a debate about prostitution. Of course, I'm not an expert, but social media and easy access to books have created experts of so many people who don't know enough. For example, I wrote a 600-word op-ed for the UK *Guardian* on Boko Haram, and the next thing I knew I had an email from Al-Jazeera asking for my expert opinion on Boko Haram. I'm not an expert on Boko Haram, but I read up on it. I made myself an expert in a few days and did the interview, because I felt that I had something to contribute on the subject. It just shows you that some of these experts are complete tosh – you shouldn't read too much into what they say. But the issue of prostitution is something I have become very involved with. Last year, I went with an Austrian NGO to Nigeria to talk about human trafficking. It is something I feel very touched by, something I'm very passionate about. I know enough to give an opinion. Usually, when they call you an expert, it basically means they want you to give your own opinion. I have an opinion on prostitution, so I don't see why I shouldn't voice it when I can.

Q Your writing addresses a wealth of themes besides prostitution, but a common denominator in many of your fictional texts is that they are women's stories. Would you call yourself a feminist?

CU I'd call myself a negofeminist. This is a term that was coined by Professor Obioma Nnaemeka, and which I feel a lot more comfortable with than feminist, because it more specifically defines the sort of feminism that African women practise, especially in patriarchal societies. Negofeminism can be understood as either no-egofeminism or negotiative feminism; it is a feminism which stays within the boundaries of social and cultural norms, but which also manipulates that space. After I heard Obioma Nnaemeka talk about negofeminism at a PhD dissertation defence, I wrote my first negofeminist short story. It is about an Igbo woman who is married to an abusive man who wants more than anything else to have a son,

but she's giving him only daughters. He can't take on a second wife because he is Catholic, and she can't walk out on the marriage because it is simply not done. The only way she can get her revenge on him is by not giving him the one thing that he wants, which is a son. So she gets her tubes tied and gets her own back at him in this way because she knows that he is never going to get a son from her. This is what negofeminism is all about; it is not confrontational, it recognises the strength of culture and the limitations of what you, as one person or as a woman, can do within that culture. It is not that I think feminism is a bad word – in many ways, I *am* a feminist – but negofeminism is something women in my culture can more easily associate with. It can give them a chance to evolve without burning bras, because they can't afford to do that. Having said all this, I've just submitted the manuscript of a new novel to my publisher, and it is not about women. So maybe I'm all womened-out now.

Q Feminist is actually one of the many labels cherished by academics. As you know, writers are notoriously wary of literary scholars, but do you think that academia has a positive role to play for creative writers?

CU Well, academics teach literature and they bring books to a totally different audience. They also bring different ways of reading texts. I was quite interested to read reviews of the same work by a regular reviewer and by a literary scholar – academics see things that you didn't know were there at all! [Laughter]

Q You've actually had a foot in both camps – academia and creative writing – as you obtained a PhD in English from the University of Leiden in 2004. What made you decide to opt for creative writing instead of a career in academia?

CU Creative writing has always been my first love. I decided to work on a PhD as a plan B in case the creative writing didn't work out, so I had something to depend on.

Q In addition to writing your PhD, you also went into politics a few years ago. You were elected onto the city council of your hometown, Turnhout, but you later gave up this position. Why did you choose writing over politics? What, if anything, can writing do that politics can't?

CU I was a small-time politician in a small city council, and you can't really achieve much that way. You achieve a lot more by writing, through which you reach a wider audience. Also, as a politician, you're operating within the principles of your party. You don't always agree with everything, but you have to, because you can't openly go against your party. Writing gives you a certain freedom which politics doesn't.

Q Some of your recent writerly interventions have been in the field of journalism, since you've written several articles for the Nigerian *Daily Times*. How do you view the difference between journalistic writing and fiction writing?

CU With fiction you can take more risks, you can make up more things, which you can't do if you're a proper journalist. With journalism the actual truth is much more important than the emotional truth, whereas with creative writing the emotional truth is what is important.

Q One of your recent non-fictional pieces, 'Covering Africa's Rear', denounces the condescension that informed the knickers4africa campaign – a charity appeal launched by a white woman who collected second-hand underwear to send to black Zimbabwean women, under the rationale that giving these women knickers and bras would prevent them from being raped. The internet has recently been the theatre of other controversies involving Africa – most notably the debates that arose around the Kony2012 video, which called for the arrest of Ugandan warlord Joseph Kony and was accused of exploiting colonial stereotypes. In both cases, the voices that were raised to denounce the image of Africa perpetuated by these campaigns met with considerable incomprehension on the part of Westerners who supported these charity movements, because they genuinely thought that they were being helpful. How difficult is it to tackle this benevolent form of racism, as opposed to outright xenophobia?

CU It is difficult to deal with people who genuinely mean well, because it is baffling to them that you don't support their well-intended campaigns. Even more painful than that sort of benevolence from the West is the one perpetuated by Africans themselves. You've probably heard about the Afro-Swedish artist Amkode Aj Linde, who baked a cake that looks like Sarah Baartman – the South African woman who was put on show in the UK – for a campaign against female genital mutilation. He used his head, painted like a golliwog, as the head of the cake, and asked the Swedish Minister for Culture to cut out the first piece of the

cake, pretending that she was performing a clitoridectomy. There was a huge outrage and Linde reacted by saying that Africans in Sweden simply didn't understand him.

Closer to home, a few years ago, I was asked to be on a panel with a Belgian author, Judith Vanistendael, who wrote a graphic novel called *De Maagd en de neger* [*The Virgin and the Nigger*]. I'd read an interview with her in the *Knack* [a Flemish news magazine] where she was asked whether she thought the title of the book might be offensive to some people, and she said something along the lines of: 'No, I call my boyfriend "mon petit nègre" [my little nigger] all the time and he doesn't mind, so I don't see why anybody should mind.' I politely declined the invitation to sit on a panel with her, so they put us in consecutive sessions instead. Once Judith Vanistendael's interview was finished, the moderator, an Afro-Belgian man called Eric Baranyanka, called me on stage and asked me why I thought the title of Judith's work was offensive. He said that, for the record, he had no problem with it, as some of his friends asked him if they could call him nigger and he said yes. I was speechless. I thought, if your friends have to ask you if they can call you the N-word, then they know something is wrong with it. So, more painful than those well-meaning knickers campaigns is the fact that some of us – like Linde, who uses the golliwog as his trademark – have no idea of the historical baggage that comes with certain words or symbols, or they just don't care. You can engage with outright xenophobia – maybe you can't reason with it, but at least you know what you're up against and you can come up with your own arguments to oppose it. It is a lot more difficult to engage with people who don't get it at all.

Q Some contemporary African writers have chosen to tackle well-meaning paternalism – the type displayed by white Westerners rather than by the Afro-Europeans you've just mentioned – by completely rejecting any form of Western intervention in Africa. For example, the Kenyan writer Binyavanga Wainana has said 'We [Africans] are not interested in what Oxfam is doing for Africa'; Teju Cole has dismissed the TED movement as suffering from what he calls the 'white saviour industrial complex'. What is your opinion of these positions?

CU When you're constantly faced with this sort of racism, you start to realise that any step you take towards finding a middle ground means giving room for some people to say 'You see, we're actually right.' You're dealing with people who don't understand the notion of the middle ground, because they don't understand what they are doing wrong, so the option you are forced to take is to go to the other extreme, even if you sound ridiculous. At the moment, you don't care how ridiculous you sound; what matters is that the other side finds a way to

listen to you. Teju and Binyavanga have access to the sort of press that matters – the mainstream press that well-meaning Westerners also read – so hopefully people will take something out of what they're writing.

Q These issues around the representation of Africa have also been debated in the literary field. African writers regularly have to face accusations of self-exoticisation, in the sense they are accused of pandering to the Western literary establishment by perpetuating clichés about Africa as a war-torn, AIDS-ridden continent. Where do you put the limit between exploring harsh realities – such as the war in Darfur, which you write about in *On Black Sisters' Street* – and perpetuating clichés? Is this something you've struggled with yourself when writing stories? Have you ever been tempted to censor yourself?

CU No, I don't censor myself – that is the worst thing a writer can do. African writers write all sorts of different stories, but we don't own publishing companies, at least not the ones that matter. There are very few African agents, and the only African editor at a major publishing house that I can think of is Ellah Allfrey of Granta. But agents and publishers are those who determine what gets published. So I don't think it is a matter of African writers writing only one particular kind of story; it is just the stories which eventually make it to the market are those picked out by agents and publishers.

Q The Caine Prize for African Writing has also come under fire in recent years for picking out only certain types of stories. But earlier this year, the chair of the judging panel, Bernardine Evaristo, explicitly invited prospective contenders to 'enlarge our concept of the continent beyond the familiar images that dominate the media: War-torn Africa, Starving Africa, Corrupt Africa – in short: The Tragic Continent'. The intention behind the statement is arguably laudable, but would you say that one type of prescriptivism is being replaced by another – ie that in the past you *had to* write about war-torn Africa to be successful, and that now you *cannot* write about war-torn Africa? Or, on the contrary, is Evaristo's statement a necessary intervention?

CU Bernardine is talking back precisely to the people who have attacked the Caine Prize for picking out authors who wrote about war, hunger and all the other clichés – issues that are actually part of the realities of Africa. I don't know if it is sensible to accuse the Caine Prize of selecting particular kinds of stories because, after all, their judges change every year, and

some of the judges are Africans themselves. I have always found those accusations a bit lazy and I don't think there is any ground to them. The story that won last year, NoViolet Bulawayo's 'Hitting Budapest', is an excellent piece, and I don't think that it was chosen because NoViolet wrote about hunger in Zimbabwe. As writers, we also share our experiences and, as a Zimbabwean writer living or having grown up in Zimbabwe, you can't write around certain issues. Brian Chikwava's *Harare North* and Petina Gappah's *An Elegy for Easterly* also suggest that you can't escape these realities, because they are part of your life. I don't think many people writing out of Africa have reached the stage where they can completely ignore all those pertinent issues. If you live in a society where things don't work, these are the things that constantly trouble you and that choose you to write about. You simply can't escape them. I mean, I enjoyed reading Ian McEwan's *On Chesil Beach*, but I also think he had the freedom to write that book because of where he is at this point in history. Many African writers don't have that freedom – not in the sense that they are censoring themselves, but in the sense that the stories which constantly come to them to be written are stories about the things that are going wrong.

Q Your first novel, *The Phoenix*, is mainly set in Belgium; your second novel, *On Black Sisters' Street*, is set in Belgium and Nigeria; and your latest book, *Night Dancer*, is set entirely in Nigeria. Is your imagination progressively going back to your country of origin?

CU [Laughter] I think I was just homesick, and *Night Dancer* was my way of dealing with it. I wanted to write a book that would force me to completely immerse myself in Nigeria. I grew up in Enugu, so I went back there in my mind. It was nice to inhabit that space for the two years it took to write the novel.

Q The dedication at the beginning of the book reads 'with love for my people'. Yet the narrative itself offers provocative – at times even quite harsh – criticism of Nigerian society, and Igbo society in particular, especially with regard to its treatment of women who do not meet certain social expectations, such as having male children or forgiving their cheating husbands. How is your dedication to be interpreted?

CU I don't know. [Laughter] I mean, it is like scolding a child... you don't scold your child because you don't love him – you do it because you do, because you want him to follow the right path. So when I critique Nigerian society, it is not because I'm not patriotic or because I

don't love Nigeria. It is precisely because I love Nigeria that these things affect me the way they do. Another reason why I wrote *Night Dancer* is because I wanted to look at Nigeria more extensively through the lens of Nnaemeka's negofeminism. I wanted to figure out how a woman who chose to break out of social boundaries, who chose *not* to be a negofeminist in a society where negofeminism would work, would be able to survive. I was also inspired by all the stories I heard growing up. I remember that my mother had a friend who had several daughters, and who was doing very well financially. She – not her husband – was the breadwinner of her family, but she couldn't be open about it. All the property they bought had to be put in her husband's name. Then when he died, she found out he had had an affair and had a ten-year-old son, to whom he had willed everything that wasn't even his to will. I was intrigued by these stories about people who suddenly had sons coming out of the woods. I also wondered about the sort of woman who would walk out on a marriage and try to find happiness on her own terms. I think that is what Ezi does in *Night Dancer*. I wanted to look at the consequences of this decision for her.

Q At the risk of sounding overly academic, I would say that the novel leans towards post-negofeminism, in the sense that, as you've just said, Ezi chooses to act outside the patriarchal system, instead of navigating established cultural spaces like negofeminists do. Would you agree the book is post-negofeminist?

CU [Laughter] Yes, if you insist!

Q Ezi is obviously the *Night Dancer* of the title, but what does this phrase refer to? The novel is deliberately vague about her nightly activities... does she become a prostitute after leaving her husband?

CU She doesn't become a prostitute, but she gets money from male lovers, yes. The phrase night dancer is actually calqued from an Acholi word (Acholi is a Ugandan language) that refers to a witch – not a witch in the spiritual sense, but in the sense of anti-woman; that is, a woman who does not act like one. Ezi breaks down social barriers and refuses to be what a woman ought to be in her culture, so she's a witch, a night dancer.

Q The novel is partly set in Kaduna, in northern Nigeria, and the final section takes place during the religious riots that erupted there at the time of the Miss World competition in 2002.

How important was it for you to engage with the northern part of the country in your fiction, and with that particular religious incident?

CU First, I needed to find a physical reason why Ezi's daughter, Mma, would stay on in Kaduna with her father's family, because at that point in the novel she is ready to go home. But also, in recent times, these sorts of clashes have become more and more commonplace in Nigeria, and I think that was playing on my mind when I was writing the novel. Even though I slightly changed the date of the riot to fit the events described in the book, I wanted the narrative to engage realistically with the Nigeria of today.

Q Religious fundamentalism is becoming an increasingly pressing issue in contemporary Nigeria; you've written about Christian fundamentalism in a recent essay. Do you think that pastors are taking over from corrupt politicians as the nation's prime plunderers?

CU They are working alongside each other. The corrupt politicians go to the pastors because they need them to keep the people in line. So the pastors haven't taken over, they just flourish alongside the corrupt politicians. Both promote very lavish lifestyles that are entirely beyond the reach of the common man. All these churches preach prosperity – the idea is that if you pray long enough and if you give enough money, at some point you'll be rich enough to buy your own jet. David Oyedepo, who has one of the biggest churches in Nigeria, has several private jets and he's just bought an airline. He has a university and a secondary school, yet people continue to give him ten per cent of whatever they earn, every Sunday.

Q Do you think these followers are victims or would you say that they are rather complicit in perpetuating an exploitative system?

CU It is very difficult, because when people are in situations where they don't see any way out, they hang on to anything that promises them an escape route. If you go to Antwerp – they have a few of those African churches there as well – you see people without papers, without recourse to anything else. In these circumstances, it is very easy to go to these churches because you're constantly fed hope. People are manipulated by pastors who know how desperate their followers are. So yes, they are victims, but at the same time it is very difficult to see grown-up people go to a church where the pastor claims to raise people from the dead, and to not feel like giving these followers a slap, and asking them how they can even begin to

believe such a man. I do find it very difficult to understand how they allow themselves to be fooled day after day, week after week.

Q In the course of this interview, we have discussed some serious, sometimes depressing issues. Do you hold out any hope for Nigeria and for the human race?

CU Yes, definitely. I'm very optimistic – Nigerians have to be, because our country is in such a disastrous state that you can't survive without hope. I actually think *Night Dancer* is a novel of hope. When you say it is a post-negofeminist novel, it shows that at some point negofeminism is not even going to be needed any more. Women – people in general – are going to be able to seek fulfilment on their own terms. So yes, I still hold out lots of hope.