

## **“Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Chika Unigwe: Voices to heed”**

Daria Tunca

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Most of my friends are unable to cite the name of one single African writer. And to be honest, I cannot blame them. Had I not studied post-colonial literature at the University of Liège, I would be equally clueless, for I distinctly remember going through my entire primary and secondary schooling, in the 1980s and 1990s, without being asked to read an African novel. When Africa was evoked in class, it was usually to briefly mention some historical fact about the colonization of the Congo (needless to say, the atrocities perpetrated by the Belgians there were not on the agenda). At best, the school invited a storyteller to familiarize us with African oral traditions, but not a word about the continent’s literary production found its way into our curriculum.

While my own lack of exposure to African fiction may not reflect the experience of the entire Belgian population, it is an indisputable fact that, in our country, acquaintance with modern sub-Saharan literatures is yet to expand beyond restricted academic and cultural circles. For instance, who among the general public knows that the West African state of Nigeria alone boasts a Nobel Prize for Literature (Wole Soyinka) and one of the most prominent novelists of the twentieth century (Chinua Achebe)? And who can tell that these two figures, both of whom started their careers in the 1950s, have inspired a long line of younger writers in their home country and in the diaspora?

Few people may know the answers to these questions, but things are perhaps about to change as contemporary Nigerian writing is gradually getting greater popular acclaim. Indeed, the international literary scene has most recently witnessed the advent of a new generation of authors of Nigerian descent whose work seems to appeal to both professional critics and wider Western audiences. The most often cited among these up-and-coming writers is no doubt Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, whose first novel, *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), has been received with great enthusiasm in the English-speaking world and has been translated into several languages, including Dutch and French. In Belgium too we can pride ourselves on having a

Nigerian literary gem in the Turnhout-based Chika Unigwe, whose debut novel, *De feniks*, was originally written in English but was directly translated into Dutch before its first publication in late 2005.

These two young female authors have a number of features in common. Not only were they born and raised in Nigeria, they also share a similar cultural background – both are Igbo, one of the three major ethnic groups in the country – and already have a long line of literary prizes appended to their names. But while Adichie has been working in the United States for several years and writes exclusively in English, Unigwe lives in Flanders and occasionally writes short stories in Dutch alongside her Anglophone production. The convergences and divergences between Adichie's and Unigwe's biographies may in a sense be representative of the similarities and differences between their respective works: many parallels can be drawn between them, but they each have their specificities. Let us delve into the fiction of these two emerging talents.

When Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is asked how she became an author, she invariably replies that she has been writing since she was old enough to spell. She often jokes about the fact that the very first stories she invented featured white characters and snow – material she found in British children's books, but which was completely unrelated to the environment she grew up in. A decisive moment in her creative development came at the age of ten, when she discovered the work of her compatriot Chinua Achebe. This illustrious novelist, poet and essayist was among the first to portray the complexities of pre- and post-colonial Nigerian society in literature, a feat which Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* may partly be said to echo.

*Purple Hibiscus* is set in the Nigeria of the 1990s, a period of history during which the country was swinging from one military regime to the next. The story is narrated in the first person by Kambili, a teenage girl whose father, Eugene, is an affluent Igbo businessman. Eugene has a multifaceted personality that can only be captured in a series of paradoxes: he fights the yoke of military dictatorship in Nigeria by publishing a pro-democracy newspaper, but he repeatedly beats his wife and children. A staunch Catholic, he makes huge donations to the local church but displays very little of this generosity towards his own father, a follower of traditional Igbo religion, to whom he repeatedly refers as a "heathen".

The novel thus tackles a wide range of topics, ranging from physical abuse to the problematic heritage left by the introduction of Christianity into Nigeria. This rough descriptive outline, however, hardly does justice to Adichie's splendid narrative, for besides its broad thematic scope, the book distinguishes itself by a sophisticated structure and an elegant style. Furthermore, by recounting the story through the voice of the shy Kambili,

Adichie allows the reader to capture all the ambiguities of the young girl's relationship with her father and his rigid Christian ideology. In this way, the novelist subtly portrays a world in which the domestic and the political are closely interwoven.

*Purple Hibiscus* is at once accessible and stimulating, a fact which no doubt accounts for its success. Adichie more modestly attributes the book's popularity to luck. As she once said in an interview, she was initially prepared for her work to be greeted with indifference, since her manuscript had prior to publication been rejected by countless American agents and publishers. They had told her that nobody cared about Nigeria abroad, obviously failing to recognise that her fiction is thought-provoking and deeply relevant – not only to the Nigerian context, but to contemporary society as a whole.

This pertinence is also clearly apparent in Adichie's short stories, several of which deal with one of the most hotly debated subjects of the moment, namely immigration. Perhaps as a result of her own experience as an African living in North America, some of her short pieces deal with Igbo migrants who have left Nigeria to settle in the United States. Most conspicuous in stories such as "You in America" (2001) or "New Husband" (2003) is the fact that the author offers a critique of the U.S., as might be expected, but also of her Nigerian protagonists. On the one hand, she denounces a Western tendency towards neo-colonial cultural homogenisation. For example, in "You in America", the narrator reports that some Americans think that every black person with an accent is Jamaican, or that Africa is a country where everyone knows everyone else. On the other hand, Adichie does not present the lack of interest in African cultures as a one-way process. Indeed, her stories frequently feature Nigerian people who glorify American standards to such an extent that they end up disparaging their African heritage. This voluntary assimilation on some of the characters' part is recurrently explored through the metaphors of language and food: Adichie's narratives abound with immigrants who reject their mother tongue in favour of an American variety of English, change their African names to American-sounding patronymics and see regular trips to fast food restaurants as a way of adapting to their host country. The author's strategy is not devoid of humour, since she seems to present grotesque protagonists only to mock them; nevertheless, the majority of her stories stand out mainly because of their poignant description of the central – often female – characters' predicament, be it financial, social or emotional.

The deep sensitivity typical of Adichie's fiction also characterises Chika Unigwe's work. Unigwe's first novel, *De feniks*, opens as the main character, a young woman of Nigerian origin named Oge, travels by train from her home in Turnhout to a hospital in Leuven where she has shortly before been diagnosed with breast cancer. The reader

progressively learns that the heroine's life is also falling apart on various other levels. Oge is struggling to come to terms with the coldness and superficiality of social interactions in Flanders, and her relationship with her Belgian husband, Gunter, has deteriorated to such an extent that the couple hardly exchange any words. The reason at the heart of this estrangement is revealed only later.

*De feniks* partly fills a worrying void in the Belgian literary landscape, as it is one of the very first works of fiction published by a Flemish writer of African origin. I believe it would be grossly inaccurate to consider this achievement the novel's only merit, yet its outstanding artistic quality has not been unanimously recognised in the Belgian press. Some journalists have indeed described the writer's representation of the rigid Flemish social decorum as exaggerated, and her unfriendly picture of Flanders as cliché-ridden. In my view, this type of criticism finds an explanation in something which the mainstream media have somehow chosen to ignore so far: Chika Unigwe has touched a raw nerve in Belgian society.

The truth is that it is a disturbing experience for anyone to be made to look into a mirror and dislike the reflection one is presented with. The encounter with this other, ugly, unrecognizable self becomes even more distressing when one realises that someone has deliberately provoked the unsettling confrontation by placing the mirror at a strategic spot in the room. The deep unease of the Belgian population lies, in my opinion, in its unwillingness to acknowledge the existence of this uncanny reflection; and this is precisely what *De feniks* forces its reader to do. Belgium, a country which for many years has directed a paternalistic gaze at the so-called African "Heart of Darkness", is now presented to itself as being "other" and unfamiliar. And what is more, this is done by an "outsider".

Orchestrating this collision of images, showing Belgium its own flaws, is the daunting task that Chika Unigwe has taken upon herself. Admittedly, her portrayal of Flemish people may come across as extreme, but this can be explained by several elements. First of all, the image of Flanders presented in *De feniks* is channelled through a subjective (and, as it turns out, unreliable) central character, who has grown up in Nigeria and has since childhood been accustomed to the local ways of life. When Oge deplores that social rules in Flanders, unlike Nigerian habits, do not allow her to visit people while they are entertaining their relatives, she is pointing at a fundamental difference between Nigerian and Flemish norms. Being represented in such a frigid and unflattering way may, for some Belgians, be a bitter pill to swallow, but it merely highlights a fact which some Europeans are yet to take in: Western standards are not universal.

Another reason why some of the Belgian characters in Unigwe's narrative have been perceived as clichéd is that, just like Adichie, she occasionally seems to use "types" rather than fully-fledged individuals to get her message across. For example, the benevolent lady whom Oge meets on her journey from Turnhout to Leuven thinks that all Africans speak Swahili, live in huts and sleep on hay. Though one may reasonably assume that only a minority of the Flemish population has such narrow-minded misconceptions, the woman's attempt to neatly fit all Africans into a single watertight category is symptomatic of a much larger phenomenon in Western Europe. Consider, for instance, the all-purpose term "allochtoon" currently mushrooming in the Belgian media: it is conveniently used to encompass every non-white person residing in the country, regardless of culture, religion, origin and, for that matter, nationality.

It should also be pointed out that, just as Unigwe's criticism of Belgian society is substantiated by observation, her representation of Flemish and Nigerian people is far from being Manichaean. In a way that may again be reminiscent of Adichie (though it is unclear who influenced whom, or if there is a connection at all), Unigwe subtly counterbalances the presence of her cold and condescending European characters with the introduction of African protagonists whose prejudices are equally unfounded. For example, Oge's mother dismisses the claim that one of her acquaintances in Nigeria is suffering from cancer, arguing that this illness is "een westerse ziekte" (*De feniks*, p. 24). She similarly shows off her alleged medical knowledge later in the book, grossly exaggerating the benefits of the epidurals performed in Europe: "Europese vrouwen lijden geen cent pijn als ze moeten bevallen. Eén spuitje en je kunt rustig blijven patiënten terwijl je kind te wereld komt" (*De feniks*, p. 45). By exposing such fallacies, the author seems to suggest that African and European societies are in fact guilty of the same human weakness: that of making sweeping generalizations about the "other".

*De feniks* is of course not only laudable because of its functional role as a mirror of cultures; it must, above all, be recognised for its literary value. This aspect of Unigwe's work was also subject to mixed reactions in the press: the book was, somewhat contradictorily, now praised for its plain style, now accused of taking imagery one step too far. Similarly, its narrative technique was now hailed for its originality, now dismissed as irrelevant. This formal element is undeniably one of the novel's most striking characteristics, for Unigwe has made the unusual choice of recounting the greater part of her story in the second person, from Oge's perspective, with one key chapter told in the third person from Gunter's point of view, and the final pages featuring Oge as an I-narrator. The impact achieved may depend on each

reader's sensitivity, but my own assessment is that the alternatives selected by the author are far from futile. Analysing them extensively would spoil the reading of the book by revealing too much, so I shall rather encourage you to discover the narrative treatment of Oge's emotional struggle yourself.

One can easily guess from these few observations that the human plight takes many forms in *De feniks*. Loneliness, alienation, illness and grief are only a few of the misfortunes befalling the characters. Yet a close reading of the book, starting with its front cover, allows for more positive notions such as metaphorical rebirth and affective reconstruction to emerge.

A reshaping of feelings and ideas may be precisely what Unigwe's and Adichie's fiction induces, as the concepts and emotions laid out on the pages of their works are crafted anew in our imagination. Each novelist leads us through this process of discovery in her own manner: Adichie demonstrates that politics and emotional complexity are not incompatible; Unigwe, whose book hopefully marks the establishment of a new Afro-Belgian literary tradition, emphasises the need for an in-depth reflection on multiculturalism in our country.

Since Adichie's and Unigwe's novels have been made available to Dutch-speaking audiences through the medium of translation, one may hope that the popularity both authors (particularly Adichie) are already enjoying in the Anglophone world finds its way into Belgium, and why not into Belgian classrooms. For, judging by these two authors' talent, one can only conclude that theirs are definitely voices to heed.

*Further information about Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Chika Unigwe can be obtained online. Chika Unigwe has an official website in Dutch and English (<http://www.chikaunigwe.com>), and a webpage in English dedicated to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (created by the author of this article) can be found at <http://www.ulg.ac.be/facphl/uer/d-german/L3/cnaindex.html>.*