

AFRICA

Chinua Achebe, African Literary Titan, Dies at 82

By JONATHAN KANDELL MARCH 22, 2013

Chinua Achebe, the Nigerian author and towering man of letters whose internationally acclaimed fiction helped to revive African literature and to rewrite the story of a continent that had long been told by Western voices, died on Thursday in Boston. He was 82.

His agent in London said he had died after a brief illness. Mr. Achebe had used a wheelchair since a car accident in Nigeria in 1990 left him paralyzed from the waist down.

Chinua Achebe (pronounced CHIN-you-ah Ah-CHAY-bay) caught the world's attention with his first novel, "Things Fall Apart." Published in 1958, when he was 28, the book would become a classic of world literature and required reading for students, selling more than 10 million copies in 45 languages.

The story, a brisk 215 pages, was inspired by the history of his own family, part of the Ibo nation of southeastern Nigeria, a people victimized by the racism of British colonial administrators and then by the brutality of military dictators from other Nigerian ethnic groups.

"Things Fall Apart" gave expression to Mr. Achebe's first stirrings of anti-colonialism and a desire to use literature as a weapon against Western biases. As if to sharpen it with irony, he borrowed from the Western canon itself in using as its title a line from Yeats's apocalyptic poem "The Second Coming."

"In the end, I began to understand," Mr. Achebe later wrote. "There is such a thing as absolute power over narrative. Those who secure this privilege for themselves can arrange stories about others pretty much where, and as, they like."

Though Mr. Achebe spent his later decades teaching at American universities, most recently at Brown, his writings — novels, stories, poems, essays and memoirs — were almost invariably rooted in the countryside and cities of his native Nigeria. His most memorable fictional characters were buffeted and bewildered by the competing pulls of traditional African culture and invasive Western values.

"Things Fall Apart," which is set in the late 19th century, tells the story of Okonkwo, who rises from poverty to become a wealthy farmer and Ibo village leader. British colonial rule throws his life into turmoil, and in the end, unable to adapt, he explodes in frustration, killing an African in the employ of the British and then committing suicide.

The acclaim for "Things Fall Apart" was not unanimous. Some British critics thought it idealized precolonial African culture at the expense of the former empire.

"An offended and highly critical English reviewer in a London Sunday paper titled her piece cleverly, I must admit, 'Hurray to Mere Anarchy!'" Mr. Achebe wrote in "Home and Exile," a 2000 collection of autobiographical essays. Some critics found his early novels to be stronger on ideology than on narrative interest. But his stature grew, until he was considered a literary and political beacon, influencing generations of African writers as well as many in the West.

"It would be impossible to say how 'Things Fall Apart' influenced African writing," the Princeton scholar Kwame Anthony Appiah once wrote. "It would be like asking how Shakespeare influenced English writers or Pushkin influenced Russians."

Mr. Appiah, a professor of philosophy, found an "intense moral energy" in Mr. Achebe's work, adding that it "captures the sense of threat and loss that must have faced many Africans as empire invaded and disrupted their lives."

Nadine Gordimer, the South African novelist and Nobel laureate, hailed Mr. Achebe in a review in *The New York Times* in 1988, calling him “a novelist who makes you laugh and then catch your breath in horror — a writer who has no illusions but is not disillusioned.”

Mr. Achebe’s political thinking evolved from blaming colonial rule for Africa’s woes to frank criticism of African rulers and the African citizens who tolerated their corruption and violence. Indeed, it was Nigeria’s civil war in the 1960s and then its military dictatorship in the 1980s and ‘90s that forced Mr. Achebe abroad.

In his writing and teaching Mr. Achebe sought to reclaim the continent from Western literature, which he felt had reduced it to an alien, barbaric and frightening land devoid of its own art and culture. He took particular exception to “*Heart of Darkness*,” the novel by Joseph Conrad, whom he thought “a thoroughgoing racist.”

Conrad relegated “Africa to the role of props for the breakup of one petty European mind,” Mr. Achebe argued in his essay “*An Image of Africa*.”

“I grew up among very eloquent elders,” he said in an interview with *The Associated Press* in 2008. “In the village, or even in the church, which my father made sure we attended, there were eloquent speakers.” That eloquence was not reflected in Western books about Africa, he said, but he understood the challenge in trying to rectify the portrayal.

“You know that it’s going to be a battle to turn it around, to say to people, ‘That’s not the way my people respond in this situation, by unintelligible grunts, and so on; they would speak,’” Mr. Achebe said. “And it is that speech that I knew I wanted to be written down.”

Albert Chinualumogu Achebe was born on Nov. 16, 1930, in Ogidi, an Ibo village. His father became a Christian and worked for a missionary teacher in various parts of Nigeria before returning to the village. As a student, Mr. Achebe immersed himself in Western literature. At the University College of Ibadan, whose professors were Europeans, he read Shakespeare, Milton, Defoe, Swift, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats and Tennyson. But the turning point in his education was the required reading of “*Mister Johnson*,” a 1939 novel set in Nigeria and written by an Anglo-Irishman, Joyce Cary.

The protagonist is a docile Nigerian whose British master ultimately shoots and kills him. Like reviewers in the Western press, Mr. Achebe’s white professors praised it as one of the best novels ever written about Africa. But Mr. Achebe and his classmates responded with “exasperation at this bumbling idiot of a character,” he wrote.

He soon joined a generation of West African writers who in the 1950s were coming to the realization that Western literature was holding the continent captive. A fellow Nigerian, Amos Tutuola, opened the floodgates with his 1952 novel, “*The Palm-Wine Drinkard*.”

After graduating from college in 1953, Mr. Achebe moved to London, where he worked for the British Broadcasting Corporation while writing stories. It was in London that he wrote “*Things Fall Apart*,” in longhand.

After returning to Nigeria to revise the manuscript, he mailed it — the only existing copy — to a London typing service, which promptly misplaced it, filling Mr. Achebe with despair. It was discovered only months later.

Publishers initially passed on the manuscript, doubting that African fiction would sell, until an adviser at the Heinemann publishing house seized on it as a work of brilliance.

In his second novel, “*No Longer at Ease*,” in 1960, he tells the story of Okonkwo’s grandson, Obi, who learns to fit into British colonial society. Raised as a Christian and educated in England, Obi abandons the countryside for a job as a civil servant in Lagos, which was the capital at the time. Cut off from traditional values, he succumbs to greed and in the end is prosecuted for graft.

In his third novel, “*Arrow of God*” (1964), Mr. Achebe reverts to the setting of an Ibo village in the early 20th century. The village priest, Ezeulu, sends his son, Oduche, to be educated by Christian missionaries in the hope that he will learn British ways and thus help protect his community. Instead Oduche becomes a convert to colonialism and attacks Ibo religion and culture.

The Nigerian civil war, also known as the Biafran war, shattered Mr. Achebe’s hopes for a more promising postcolonial future, and deeply affected his literary output. The scene was set for war when, in January 1966, Ibo army officers killed the prime minister

and other officials and seized power. Seven months later, the insurgents were ousted in a counter-coup by military commanders from the Muslim northern region.

Before the year ended, Muslim troops had massacred some 30,000 Ibo people living in the north. In 1967 the Ibo then seceded from Nigeria, declaring the southeastern region the independent Republic of Biafra, and the civil war began in earnest, raging through 1970 until government troops invaded and crushed the secessionists.

Mr. Achebe's fourth novel, "A Man of the People," published in early 1966, had predicted this course of events with such accuracy that the military government in Lagos decided he must have been a conspirator in the first coup, an accusation he denied. Mr. Achebe fled, settling in Britain with his wife, Christiana; their two sons, Ikechukwu and Chidi; and two daughters, Chinelo and Nwando. (Information about his survivors was not immediately available.)

After the civil war, Mr. Achebe returned to Nigeria for two years before accepting faculty posts in the 1970s at the University of Massachusetts and the University of Connecticut. He returned home again in 1979 to teach English at the University of Nigeria.

The civil war was the theme of many of his writings during these years. Among the most prominent were a book of poetry, "Beware Soul Brother" (1971), which won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize, and a short-story collection, "Girls at War," which appeared in 1972.

But for more than 20 years a case of writer's block kept him from producing another novel. He attributed the dry spell to emotional trauma that had lingered after the civil war.

"The novel seemed like a frivolous thing to be doing," he told The Washington Post in 1988.

That year Mr. Achebe finally published his fifth novel, "Anthills of the Savannah," the story of three former school chums in a fictional country modeled after Nigeria. One of them becomes a military dictator; another is appointed minister of information; and the third is named editor of the leading newspaper. All meet violent ends.

The novel was widely admired. Discussing it in 1988 in The New York Review of Books, the Scottish journalist Neal Ascherson wrote: "Chinua Achebe says, with implacable honesty, that Africa itself is to blame, and that there is no safety in excuses that place the fault in the colonial past or in the commercial and political manipulations of the First World."

Mr. Achebe barely had time to savor the acclaim before the car accident outside Lagos that injured him. He received medical treatment in London and moved to the United States, taking a teaching post at Bard College in the Hudson River valley, where he remained until 2009. He received the Man Booker International Prize for lifetime achievement in 2007. Last fall he published "There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra."

The return of civilian, democratic rule to Nigeria in 1999 prompted Mr. Achebe to visit for the first time in almost a decade. He met the newly elected president, Olusegun Obasanjo, and cautiously praised him as the best possible leader "at this time." He also traveled to his native village, Ogidi.

Mr. Achebe returned to the United States, but his heart remained in his homeland, he said.

"People have sometimes asked me if I have thought of writing a novel about America, since I have now been living here some years," Mr. Achebe wrote in "Home and Exile." His answer was "that America has enough novelists writing about her, and Nigeria too few."

Correction: March 22, 2013

An earlier version of this obituary misspelled the last name of another Nigerian author. He is Cyprian Ekwensi, not Ekwendi. It also misstated the title of a novel by Amos Tutuola. It is "The Palm Wine Drinkard," not "The Palm Wine Drunkard." It also misstated the location of the University of Nigeria, where Mr. Achebe taught. It is in Nsukka, not Lagos.

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