Appendix

A Rendezvous with T. Obinkaram Echewa

An Excerpt

Described by Derek Wright as the “neglected novelist,” the Nigeria-born writer Thomas Obinkaram Echewa (b. 1940), brings up issues which have not been acclaimed the recognition they deserve, and which claim serious critical attention today. Writing in English, what he calls the “jazzification” or “Igbofying” of language, he speaks about his novels, his thoughts regarding the very act of writing itself, in this interview.

Echewa has written three novels: The Land’s Lord (1976), The Crippled Dancer (1986), and I Saw the Sky Catch Fire (1992). His fourth novel is upcoming in the near future. He has also written books for children: How Tables Came to Umu Madu: The Fabulous History of an Unknown Continent (1992), The Ancestor’s Tree: 9 (1994), Mbi. Do This! Mbi. Do That: A Folktales from Nigeria (1998), The Magic Tree: A Folktales from Nigeria (1999). He was honoured with the Union of America Book Award in 1976, for his novel The Land’s Lord. He was the Keynote Speaker, in the 10th International Conference of the Igbo Studies Association, held at Howard University, Washington D.C., in April, 2012. He is committed to the cause of the spread of Igbo studies. The interview was kindly granted by the author after his Keynote Speech in the 10th International Conference of the Igbo Studies Association, in April 2012, at Washington D.C.
Interview

Anwesha: Your works have not been accorded the recognition they deserve, as Derek Wright has written. Do you agree with this? What is your response?

Echewa: Derek Wright calls me Africa's "neglected novelist." I agree with him that I have probably not received as much recognition as I would have preferred from fellow Nigerians and Africans. Still, I am grateful that an Australian reads me as insightfully as he does.

Bella Brodzki at Sarah Lawrence also wrote an excellent article in the PMLA some twelve years ago, on (inter-cultural, inter-gender, inter-generational) "translation" in *I Saw the Sky Catch Fire*. The novel is also prominently featured in her book, *Can These Bones Live? Translation. Survival, and Cultural Memory*. There is nothing more gratifying to a writer than to feel that somebody has discovered the gems he has hidden in a novel. Wright and Brodzki have made me very happy. So did the John Updike in his *New Yorker* review of *The Land's Lord*, when that novel first came out.

... Two of my novels were nominated as among the best one hundred books written by an African writer during the twentieth century. ... *The Land's Lord* won the English-Speaking Union Prize in 1977, one year before Salman Rushdie won the same prize. *I Saw the Sky Catch Fire* was a *New York Times* Notable Book, and was cited as among the best novels published in the US during the 1990s. Still, there are two things that I miss: The first is the voices of the "home crowd," and the second is, especially with respect to *I Saw the Sky Catch Fire*, reviews that go beyond gender issues to recognize and perhaps highlight the panoply of traditional story-telling stylistics.
Anwesha: When you wrote your first novel *The Land's Lord*, what made you take up a subject which had been the focus for quite a few African writers, and write it anew, ascribing entirely a different dimension to it?

Echewa: Well, *The Land's Lord* is not the same story of a White colonizer and the colonized Africans, which has been the subject for quite a few African novels during and after Nigeria's independence. *The Land's Lord* is about religion, and I was not aware that many other Africans had written about it when I did. Even if they had, I would still feel that I was entitled to my say. Religion was a subject I had to write about because I was losing my ardent, life-long Catholic faith. *The Land's Lord*, as it were, represented my emancipation from an abstract, theological, and doctrinaire form of Christianity, which loses its argument with Ala, the silent, present, and ubiquitous Land-Goddess of the Igbo's. At the end of the novel, Old Man Ahamba, an Igbo elder, baptizes the priest in the name of Humanity. The question which is implied is that: *Why can't we be human together?*

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Anwesha: Ahamba repeatedly educates Higler about the importance of the Land. How and why does the Land hold so much of significance for Igbo people?

Echewa: Igbo people believe that the Land is god, the premier god. Actually, a goddess! The Land is what some might refer to as "Mother Earth," from which life initially sprouts and to which it ultimately returns. The land holds a central place in Igbo cosmology. The first and the last page of *The Land's Lord* testify to this, and the title of my novel should be read as "The Land Is Lord!" The Land is not merely an environment, and far from being passive, it is very active, even aggressive, it resists encroachment, subverts intrusion and ejects
anything unworthy. The priest, for example, feels that it (the Land) is boisterously fecund and teems with all types of life, hides mysteries that the sun cannot penetrate. It is not only foreboding but seems to be closing in on him all the time. A man like Philip (who committed a suicide) would not be receiving an ordinary burial, because the Land would reject his corpse, given the abominations he had committed.

... Anwesha: Varied perspectives of women are brought out in *I Saw the Sky Catch Fire*, be it a mother, a grandmother, a wife, a widow, a prostitute, a Western ethnographer. Being a male novelist, was it difficult for you to make a portrayal so as to do justice to these female voices? When memory alone can vouch for the past, as found in the different experiences of women in your novel, how do you—as a writer—look back at such delicate moments of the past?

Echewa: What I have done in *I Saw the Sky Catch Fire* is not a mere reporting, nor is it what I have personally experienced. I have taken liberties with historicity. After the Women’s War in 1929, two commissions of inquiry, set up by the Colonial Office in London, produced official reports, which today stand as the “official history” of the war. My novel is an imagined, alternative history, seen from the point of view of some of the women who fought in the war. At the same time, the novel reaches beyond the war with colonialism, and includes other battles with men (husbands) and the circumstances of life. The titles of the various chapters testify to this fact. As for my sources, some of them come from what I have come to know as someone who hails from the area where the war was fought: experience, conversations, observation, imagination and even some actual research. By reconfiguration, transformation, extrapolation and imagination. I have sought to do justice and give honor to
all of my female relatives, to whom the novel is dedicated. Chapter Five: “The Impossible Wife.” was the first chapter of the novel written. That chapter originated from an unpublished short story, which, in turn, was written in response colloquies I used to have with my older daughter on the topics of “feminism” and polygamy, when she was about fourteen. During one of our exchanges, I brought up the idea that Igbo women of my grandmother’s (and her great-grandmother’s) age had fought and died in an actual war involving soldiers, guns and death, and not in a feminist war of words.

As for my ability as a man to empathize fully with women, I don’t see why that is a surprise or a problem. Men have always written about women, and women about men. Beyond that, I have to say that I have as much a claim to my mother as my sister. As for getting under the skin of a woman like Nne-nne, that took some effort. But when I stood in her proverbial shoes and began listening to her intently, her voice began to echo in my ears. I got into sync with her, and the timbre and tempo of that voice, and her stories poured out, as it were, inexorably. Her voice drives the story and gives it connectivity, even when she has to loop back in time to pick up temporarily discarded strands in her storyline. Seen from Nne-nne’s point of view, the novel is really a warrior’s valedictory...


Echewa: No. Elizabeth Ashby-Jones, in I Saw the Sky Catch Fire, is not as fully developed as Father Higler in The Land’s Lord. Even so, she is not modeled after anyone, or any group of people. As I already stated, I have read many novels, diaries, field notes, and administrative field reports, written by assorted European visitors to Africa. Perham is one
of them, but there are other women like Green, Leith-Ross, and Andreski. Over the years, these have left their marks on my memory. In a majority of these accounts, impatience and condescension are unrestrained, and a defenseless Africa is disparaged without compunction. Even so, I believe that my treatment of Elizabeth Ashby Jones, and of Father Higler, is studiously fair and benign. They get their due as human beings, not only from me as a writer, but from the villagers they encounter. In the case of Ashby-Jones, for example, the women continually invite her to be their Nwanyi Ibem or “Fellow Woman,” an invitation she snubs, preferring instead to remain an aloof, task-driven European scientist. What I want to highlight is: Why can’t people from different cultures treat each other with respect? Why is it often a necessity to consider some cultures as superior and others inferior?

In contrast, to the tendency of Westerners to separate themselves from the rest of mankind, I may point out that, in the Johnny Weissmuller movies of the 1940s, African children like me cheered for, and identified with Tarzan, because of his goodness and strength; and disdained the dark, evil, loincloth-wearing buffoons, who were Tarzan’s adversaries. It never occurred to us that Tarzan’s enemies were supposed to represent us. When the manuscript for I Saw the Sky Catch Fire was making the rounds among publishers, one editor wrote to say that she was enthralled by the novel, until she reached the fourth chapter. She could not go on beyond that, she said, because of how I treated Elizabeth Ashby-Jones. What this editor was referring to is popularly known as POE, or Point of Entry. It is (or used to be) an unspoken requirement in publishing that any novel by a non-Westerner had to provide a “point of entry” in the form of a sympathetic Western character, for Western readers.
Anwesha: Are the experiences of Ajuzia and his mental dilemmas in *The Crippled Dancer*, and *I Saw the Sky Catch Fire*, related to your personal life?

Echewa: No, though some people may find that hard to believe that I am not Ajuzia and did not have a grandmother like Nne-nne. Ajuzia is not even my alter ego. However, he could be my brother, friend or school mate. The only parallel between us is that I came to the US to study on a scholarship. Everything else about him, his family, background, biography, and personality is invented. . . . My aim in *The Crippled Dancer* was to place some of our people's famed "traditions," on the docket and cross-examine them. Some traditions did not fare well in that cross-examination. Ironically, it was Chief Orji, the chief antagonist in the novel, who provided the verdict, when he said: Everyone, on the long run, becomes an ancestor. Good people, evil people, witch-crafters, murderers, thieves, all become ancestors in the long run. So when we indiscriminately honor ancestors, we unwittingly include people who were evil and criminal. Another fulcrum on which the story of *The Crippled Dancer* turned was a question asked by Ajuzia: What does a man do if he is about to be murdered by his brothers, and he sees a passing stranger who can rescue him? Does he quietly accept wrongful death from his brothers in order to preserve the sanctity of brotherhood, or does he invoke the help of the stranger even if this entails the destruction of the brothers? Continuing this line of questioning, Ajuzia asks: Suppose the stranger makes a slave of you because you now owe your life to him, and enslaves your brothers because they had conspired to commit murder, can your brothers now blame you for the plight of everyone involved? (Refer to Echewa, *The Crippled Dancer* 188). That to me is a good question to ask, of the past and of present situations in our homeland. . . .
Anwesha: You have chosen English as a medium to write your novels. Why is it so? What are your views about the debate between Chinua Achebe and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o regarding the politics of language?

Echewa: I applaud Ngũgĩ’s efforts to promote the vernacular and to write in it. At the same time, I agree with Achebe that it is not possible or realistic to convert instantly from the European languages to the African vernacular. Many variables have to change, not the least of which is the ability of existing African vernaculars to carry the freight currently borne by “reserve languages” like English. For example, is it possible to do algebra or calculus in Gikuyu? Even so, I share the concern that unless African languages modernize, they will simply die. In the meantime, what I try to do with English in my writing is . . . to Igbofy and jazzify it. At times this may mean infusing it with Igbo words and phrases, and other times fracturing re-setting English syntax to make it more compliant with Igbo. Jazzification is a term I have coined from Achebe’s statement in Hopes and Impediments concerning the invention of Jazz by African slaves, from the discarded instruments they found in the US. These slaves began to use these instruments beyond the ways intended by their designers, and in the end they produced a new form of music called Jazz. African writers can do the same thing with the European languages. Igbo is the language of my childhood, the language in which I became conscious of myself and the world. I call it the language of my soliloquies. I talk to myself in Igbo. However, English supplanted it, and became the language of my education and adulthood. Therefore I have to confess that my Igbo is stunted. . . .
Notes

1 The interview, titled “A Rendezvous with T. Obinkaram Echewa,” has been sent for publication to *Research in African Literatures*, Indiana University Press. An excerpt from the manuscript is produced here.
Works Cited


