Following is an account of the interview given by Chinua Achebe on 11 March 1981, at Madras, during his lecturing assignment in India. The interviewers were D.V.K. Raghavacharyulu (DVK), K.I. Madhusudana Rao (KIM) and E.V. Harajagannadh (BVH).

DVK: Professor Achebe, we in India have taken a lively interest in your fictional work, and your Ibo Quartet comprising *Things Fall Apart*, *No Longer at Ease*, *Arrow of God* and *Man of the People*, has had a great impact on the Indian Readers. Your novels depict a sociological situation, in which individuals brought up on the values of the past are made to confront the realities of the present, experiencing in the process, several kinds of conflict and tension. Social change and culture-shock are aspects of Indian life in our times, and the Nigerian situation seems to correspond to our own, and we wonder whether this similarity is not, at least in part, responsible for our response to your work.
Achebe: I am glad that my novels do attract such attention from the reading public in your country, and not only from the University academicians. In the final analysis, a writer of fiction must proceed from his own specific local reality towards the universals of human experience and, should I say, of human aspiration. At the same time, the particulars of one's own culture must be the defining framework for a novelist. My situations and characters are drawn from the Ibo Society, whose tribal structures of value, attitude and norm, have been subjected to heavy pressure from the western impact. I am not interested in making value judgements, but as an artist the major premise of my work is to show and tell how the individuals, caught in social and institutional change, respond in terms of their deep psychic urges - the irony, the tragedy and the glory of the human predicament, in short. As a matter of fact, the conventional Ibo society had certain shared values a world-view, if I may say so, and certain personality goals, a behavioural model, and a mythic-ritualistic strategy of communal action. The
advent of the colonial and post-colonial institutions has tended to erode these conventional life-styles and patterns of human relationships. I am not concerned with which is better, the old or the new, the African or the European; both have possibilities imponderables and ambiguities. But in their encounter and confrontation both have tended to shift away from their primary or radical assumptions throwing up unpredictable, contingent realities. Gain and loss are perhaps eventually balanced, but for the novelist there is here rich material to deal with, in terms of narrative and characterisation. And, certainly, too, there is a possibility for the ironic development of various points of view.

Would you say that in Things Fall Apart, your protagonist, Okonkwo, represents such a situation? For instance, doesn't Okonkwo represent the kind of individual who would be a misfit, even a tragic or heroic misfit, in any given society, in the tribal Ibo society, or the changed westernised Ibo society?
Achebe: This is true— to a point of course. Okonkwo is unaccommodated in both worlds. His loyalty to his Chi— or personal, indwelling God— works in an ambivalent manner. Chi affirms what a person does, and a person confirms what his Chi prompts. But the point is, Okonkwo loses control, self-mastery, and drifts precipitously towards tragedy. But circumstances have also a heavy hand in it. As a chronicler of life, it has been my business to contemplate the whole process of cultural change and present Okonkwo in the total perspective of the two orders, not so much in conflict merely, but in subversive collaboration against an objective perception of a reality. Okonkwo is cut off from reality, and becomes a victim of illusion, of a false perception of himself. Hence his self-governing Chi cannot hold him together, he falls apart, so does his outer world, which suffers an ecological, historical and existential breakdown and displacement.

BVH: Doesn’t *Arrow of God* present a slightly different situation? Isn’t Ezeulu, the Priest of the Ibo tribe, a much stronger, hence a more heroic figure?
He inhabits a more complex, almost hieratic universe which demands self-sacrifice, valour and vision. The destiny of a whole society is in his hands. For instance, his paraclitean responsibility is much more a matter of his adherence to tribal ritual than that of Raju, the reluctant saint in Narayan's *The Guide*?

**Achebe**: I am not quite familiar with Narayan's work, but I presume your comparison implies an interesting insight from the point of your own reading. But I do agree with you when you say that the threatened loss of ritual content in *Arrow of God* is more serious than the disintegration of personality in *Things Fall Apart*. But I must also say that the duality that prevails in the Ibo world-view is not simply a dialectical opposition of two spatio-temporal concepts. Two things make one rather than divide further into four, and so on. Myth in the African context, as it is perhaps in many non-western cultures, is not the opposite, much less a negation, of the real. It reinforces, structures, rationalises reality. Ezeulu's calendar of events leading to the Yam Festival is
not merely an announcement. It is an annunciation of the Invisible Present, or the Eternal, if you might say so, and hence even in his apparent personal failure, Ezeulu becomes an arrow in the bow of God. All his actions and reflexes are ritualistic responses to a mythically ordained view of reality. Arrow of God is a novel of African Being and of African Becoming as well. There is no dichotomy in this, but rather a unitive principle of viewing two as one, many as one, instead of one as two, or one as many.

No Longer at Ease and A Man of the People are less dense with Ibo myth and ritual and seem to be narratives of the conflict between morals and manners in a changing society. You seem to be more preoccupied in these novels with the synchronic rather than the historical situation. You almost give the impression of being a happy humorist, a genial satirist, exposing the corruption, the duplicity, and the gullibility of leaders and people in the post-colonial world. This brings an inevitable comparison between these novels and
Achebe: I believe I should agree with you. The protagonists in *No Longer At Ease* and *A Man of the People* represent the present generation, with the historical situation very much behind them. They are ordinary, almost unheroic, but they are entirely representative - I believe that the Novelist as Teacher has some function, some role in society. And even satire must speak in undertones of humour rather than in overtones of indignation. It was great fun, and joy, writing these novels. But the reference to Mr. Naipaul is teasing, almost intriguing. I do admire Mr. Naipaul, but I am rather sorry for him. He is too distant from a viable moral centre; he withholds his humanity; he seems to place himself under a self-denying ordinance, as it were, suppressing his genuine compassion for humanity. His style is all too perfect, steel-bright, metallic and so forth. But I am a different kind of writer, at least.
KIM: Naipaul is of course obsessed with form and style—almost to the point of being puritanical. But I wonder—if Mr. Naipaul is all that self-centred and self-righteous. Doesn't he, for instance, in A Free State, Guerillas and A Bend in the River, offer a new perspective on modern man—rootless, placeless and homeless, but certainly deserving sympathy, understanding and compassion?

Achebe: What I mean is, there are many omitted possibilities in the works of writers like Naipaul, and my interests are different, and lie elsewhere. Perhaps the Caribbean situation lends credibility to the kind of work undertaken by Mr. Naipaul. But I am aware that there are writers over there, like George Camming and Wilson Harris (and Tutuola, Soyinka and Ngugi in Africa too), whose novels are more kindred in spirit and I am more at ease with their work. To some extent these writers share my own concern with man in crisis in terms of African sensibility—call it Negritude if you will, not in its purely political sense—and in terms also of the felt life of individuals shaped of course, by the dynamics of the meeting
The text reads:

of two cultures, which is inevitable. I have been interested in how the ensuing struggle for self-reference shapes and changes the texture of the human personality. What happens to the individuals, Okonkwo, Ezeulu or others is known, but the diffused tumult arisen out of the tragic encounter is more important for my fictional treatment than the political outcome or result in purely historical terms. You may say that character interests me more than the circumstances in which my people and the society are placed.

DVK: Having done us the honour of visiting our country, have you had an opportunity of getting acquainted with our writers, particularly those using English as a medium of creative expression?

Achebe: I wish I had. But my visit, though not the first, and I hope not the last, has only been for three weeks—and here there has been a cultural miscalculation,—three Ibo weeks are twelve Indian days—and I must get back. I am of course aware of the work of Anand, Raja Rao and Narayan, though my familiarity with their works is not as deep as
it may be expected. But at Mysore I was excited by my encounters with such brilliant, if abrasive, creative writers like Ananta Murti and others. I have in fact made my visit to India a modest pilgrimage to the land which had invented the zero in the past and, in our own times, the commonwealth concept. It is a convenient fiction and has held out many possibilities for creative discovery and self-dramatisation.

KIM: Is there any aspect of your work to which you feel greater attention should have been paid by critics and scholars?

Achebe: Yes, indeed. My fictional work has received the courtesy of wide critical response, although what I do as a novelist is independent of what others say about it. But sometimes I do feel that my work in Children's literature and in the field of literary criticism has not been given the attention it deserves. I personally have derived great satisfaction from writing for the children. Writing for the children is a greater challenge and opportunity than writing for the adults. The mythic and the real
merge in natural symbiosis in the radical, undifferentiated innocence of children. And a creative writer must in a sense become a child to capture the flavour and essence of life.

BVH: Are you currently at work on a new novel?

Achebe: Yes. I must confess that I can share a secret with you before it becomes a public scandal. I have a work in progress—a novel which I hope will win favour with my readers. But it will not be prudent on my part to speak more about an unborn child.

DVK: You have referred to your interest in literary criticism. In fact your academic background, which includes higher studies in the United Kingdom and prestigious teaching positions in Nigeria and abroad, finely blends with your concerns as a creative writer. You have also been intimately associated with various literary and educational journals in Africa and have been doing excellent work as editorial advisor for the Heinemann African Writers Series in projecting the contemporary cultural image of Africa. Your Okike, which corresponds to Srijana in our language, has indeed been the organ
of African Renaissance. In your own criticism, especially in that directed to the study of fictional works, you seem to imply that a novel has not only an ontological but also an epistemological centre. In other words, would you suggest that fiction may very well be a vehicle for knowledge, the kind of knowledge which could not be had as convincingly from any another conceptual tool?

Achebe: Now, that is a most interesting question, but difficult to answer over a cup of tea, or is it a cup of coffee - I understand that in India the South is the coffee zone, and tea is a punishing kind of status symbol. Well, let me see. Yes. I think I would basically go along with what you have said. Fiction is certainly one of the most effective ways of getting at Truth - or certain kinds of Truth in any event. That is what myth is in most non-western cultures, as I have already said earlier. Myth is not a surrogate for, but an efficient agent of reality. For instance, scientific axioms and assumptions without which there can be no science; the equator, an imaginary or fictitious line on paper, still defines and formulates the globe of
the earth. "Willing suspension of disbelief", as Coleridge says, or the will to myth, is at the root of aesthetic response. Or take commonwealth literature itself - a useful fiction, but still a fiction of the non-existent commonwealth - for which your own leader Nehru was responsible, which has in many ways defined the reality of English literature for our time. Extending the argument, in a serious sense, the novelist makes use of fiction to adumbrate, demonstrate and enact truth - the truths of life, of man, of the world, of the future. The African writer finds the fictional mode quite natural and integral to his culture, thanks to the syncretism of oral and tribal art traditions in Africa. Take Tutuola, for instance, where the very modern questions of freedom and responsibility, of complicity and escape, are compellingly drawn in the narrative idiom of folk-fiction. Of course, there can only be one Tutuola, but that is another matter.

DVK : As there can only be one Chinua Achebe. You have yourself turned Ibo traditional materials to wonderful fictional use. So, may it be inferred from what
you say, that the novel as a literary form need not be written off. This, particularly at a time when epitaphs are being prepared to celebrate the death of the novel or certificates to announce the birth of the anti-novel, the anti-anti-novel, and so on.

**Achebe**

The novel is, I think, still alive, and has great potential, particularly in the African cultures. It has a good job waiting to be done. It is still a bright book of life.

**BWH**

Thank you Prof. Achebe, for a most interesting interview. We wish you could spend more time with you, but we see you are already looking at your watch to keep time for another important engagement. Thank you.

**Achebe**

I must thank you, indeed. It has been for me an educative experience, I should say. Thank you.