

Preface

He Wants To Marry Me Again And Other Stories by Chinyere Okafor is a collection of eleven stories divided into two sections: *Mothers and Fathers, Teachers and Learners*. The stories evoke laughter and they all have several layers of meaning. On the surface they can be read as reflecting the everyday experiences of very ordinary people, laughing at the situations and questioning them at the same time. At this level we hear our own voices, our own thoughts and then see ourselves acting the same way as the characters.

This surface level then reveals another deeper level: what our voices echo back to us, what our own actions reflect about us — reflections of self empowerment as in *He wants to Marry me Again, The Kolanuts are all Dead* or as in the hilarious, and I dare say, yet to be written into a full length story, *Resurrection Before Burial*. Even the *Professor's Return Journey*, an autobiographical story, which celebrates the life and time of a professor upon the announcement of his death, is also about empowerment. The empowerment surfaces in the very life of the student whose vocation eloquently answers the rhetorical question:

Professor,
Shall we await your return
when we all know
that the deadly visitor
Always returns alone
where owls sing a dirge?

The Professor cannot go away or die because his life continues in this and other students.

At yet another level, there is a strand that runs through the stories, sometimes like a puff of cloud in the wind and at other times, like a torrent in a storm. It is the strand of the pain that injustice and oppression breed in the relationships between individuals or between groups in the same society.

Although each of the stories breathes this pain, it comes fully alive in *Rats Come in Anger, Champagne for Men Only, and She is a Man*.

Chinyere Okafor's achievement in this regard is to force attention on the issue by appearing to ignore it. It is never the central focus, some other event is being presented, some child is even trying to 'get away with a lie as in *Pupil in the Thorn Bush* and yet, the pain keeps nudging us where it hurts.

We laugh in pain as the rats eat the curtains in a Professor's office because he can no longer throw any leftovers into the office dustbin — he has in fact stopped eating lunch because he can no longer afford it. In the story, *Champagne for Men Only*, a lady sexually harassed by her boss finds that her story cannot be accepted nor acted upon because she is complaining to a world dominated by men. In fact, in the classic manner in which all oppressors relate to the oppressed, the woman becomes a victim of her misfortune. She is asked to stop seeking the favours of the man who says she is a 'drink' that he must have and to add salt to the wound, the men have a hearty laugh over the matter. In *Anecdotes of her Rites of Passage to America*, the young lady travelling to America is insulted and humiliated by the Airways staff for daring to seek a better life. In *Ms Smith and the Multicultural Game*, the young black girl cannot talk about her roots in Ms Smith's class — in a world in which opportunities and the individual's sense of identity have much to do with roots.

An important feature of the stories is how this pain is overcome. Chinyere Okafor's characters show that each individual has a need to take responsibility for his/her actions and that only action on the part of the individual and group can provide effective answers. These actions can take simple to complex forms. In *Anecdotes of her Rites of Passage to America*, Chioma turns round and waves at the woman who has insulted her and with that act shows that she is above the world of insults. The response of the crowd to this unexpected gesture is to cheer Chioma. In *He Wants to Marry Me Again*, Ivuoma finds in the story of the woman who sits by her that the answer to the pain of injustice and humiliation lies in the decision to empower herself.

In *She is a Man*, the response is collective and violent as the group of hungry youths break into Madam's house to liberate it of the food that is denied them. In *The Kolanuts are all Dead*, and *Over his own Dead Body*, the response is underground revolutionary work with the promise of a heated morning in the long harmattan season.

The author's achievement in the collection lies in the very manner in which the stories are told. Her narrative style incorporates the use of humour, dialogue, flashbacks, proverbs, pidgin English and symbolism. Her use of the active present continuous to narrate the experiences of the characters ensures that the action is always on-going and because of this, there is always the need to have recourse to the past through flashbacks which reveal the experiences and hence motives of the characters. Since the characters are ordinary people living extraordinary lives because of the solutions that they devise to their problems, they use pidgin English and a lot of proverbs to narrate themselves and their ideas.

Finally, it would have been surprising if many of the stories were not about women. After all, Chinyere Okafor is a woman writing about a world in which men see women as wine to be drunk or as people to whom only the word "Sir" rather than Madam is often used by the men who work under them.

In these circumstances, the question of self empowerment is not just important — it is the critical consciousness that must inform what lives women and the rest of society ultimately live. I want to say that another achievement of Chinyere Okafor is that although the question of critical consciousness is presented largely through the eyes of women, each story leaves the reader in no doubt that we all — men, women and children — share the same space and the same ground.

Chinyere Okafor was born to a family of teachers from Arochukwu in what is now known as Abia State, Nigeria. Her primary school education was largely in Eke, Enugu while her secondary education was in Holy Rosary, Awgu and Queen's School, Enugu. She studied at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, where she obtained her BA degree in English (1975) and University College, Cardiff, Wales where she got the PGD in Theatre Studies (1977). She also attended the University of Sussex, Brighton, where she obtained her MA in African Studies with specialisation in Drama in 1978. Her Doctorate of Philosophy was from the University of Nigeria in 1989. Her doctoral work was on Drama and Society in a Traditional African Setting.

Chinyere Okafor, a Senior Lecturer, currently teaches Literature and Drama in the Department of English and Literature, University of Benin, Benin-City. Before joining the University of Benin, she taught at the University of Port Harcourt, (1976-

1980). She was at Cornell University, USA, as a Rockefeller Fellow (1991-1992).

Chinyere Okafor's first stories were written in the mid eighties. Since then, she has written and published literary works many of which have won national and international recognition. In the 1994 award for Literary Excellence organised under the auspices of the Association of Nigerian Authors, she was "the special discovery of the year for her proficiency in the three genres of Literature — poetry, drama and prose". I have always considered it a major achievement that she produces and acts in the very drama that she also writes.

Chinyere Okafor has stated that the purpose of her life "is to contribute positively to society in any environment in which I find myself. All forms of oppression — class, racial or gender — instinctively bring tears and then anger to my heart". The stories in this collection are an eloquent tribute to the fulfilment of her life's purpose. They evoke laughter, sadness, anger and ultimately, faith in the ability of the individual acting in concert with others to overcome life's hurdles irrespective of what or who are behind them.

Festus Iyayi
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