

CHIKA UNIGWE

A Tale of Two Books

A Forgotten Story and Things Fall Apart

I

IN THIS STORY, the girl has tightly plaited hair gathered on top of her head in an intricate style and decorated with a dozen multicolored baubles. It looks like a miniature, brightly decorated Christmas tree. We will call this girl Christmas. Christmas is eight years old. Or maybe already nine. It does not matter. We are less concerned with her precise age than we are with the fact that she is a child. Another important fact about Christmas is this: she is a greedy reader with an appetite for books that stuns even her own parents. And this appetite is encouraged not just by her parents but by the numerous well-intentioned adults who surround her. Another important fact about this child—her literary tastes have not yet developed. Therefore, in addition to the Enid Blyton books her parents bring her back from holidays in London and America, she reads everything else she stumbles upon: the literature textbooks her older siblings are prescribed by school to read, the romance novels her older sister has discovered and reads giggling and sighing on her bed, the Ian Fleming Bond novels with long, delightful titles her brothers read while Marley and U Roy play in the background, and the books with beautiful black women on their covers, but with stories of women with eyes like dolls: hazel or blue or green eyes waiting to be rescued by tall, dark (read “tanned”) knights in shining armor that a certain social aunt brings. On the day this story begins, the social aunt is visiting and as usual, she has a book for the girl. It is a small, well-thumbed book. On its cover is a striking, frightening illustration of a long-tailed, two-horned, charcoal-black devil with glowing eyes and a three-pronged pitchfork.

2

AS A CHILD—as is the case with most people who become writers—I was a voracious reader. I read everything from bread labels to newspapers in hospital waiting rooms. I had no literary fences. My parents bought me age-appropriate books, but they were not the only ones who invested in

my reading. And the danger in a young child reading indiscriminately is this: sometimes they read things that are so unwieldy they lie awake at night pondering over them. Sometimes they read things that they cannot speak about, that cause them “brain trauma.” Psychogenic amnesia. But psychogenic amnesia, like all amnesia, can be selective. You can forget the title of the book but not that you stayed up many nights afterwards praying for your soul. Or that for a long time you believed the “truths” of that book.

3

IN THIS STORY, Christmas takes that book from the aunt and goes to her favorite reading spot: a long, red couch under a framed picture of a long, silky-haired Jesus with benevolent blue eyes and hands spread out, calling all to His Sacred Heart. The heart is red and rays of light radiate from it. There is something comforting about the heart, and about lying on the couch right under that heart. She always feels safe on that couch. She imagines being enveloped in that light and love and warmth. She ignores the cover of the book, although it slightly unnerves her, and begins to read.

The book is not more than fifty pages long and begins innocuously enough by quoting the book of Genesis. “And on the sixth Day, God created man, saying “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness.” The book emphasizes that man was made in God’s likeness—and God’s likeness, as we see in illustrations of Jesus (one of which is above the girl’s head) is Caucasian—and then the next chapters tell the story of Cain and Abel, and how Cain kills Abel out of jealousy and is punished by God with a mark on his forehead. So far, the story is familiar to the girl. And then, Bam! The mark that Cain gets on his forehead signaling him out as a murderer, cursed for generations by God, is not simply a mark (as the girl has always thought) but a skin color. That mark is his black skin. And that curse lives in every descendant of Cain (and these descendants are distinguishable by the color of their skin). The author goes on to list all the tragedies that have befallen the black race, those descendants of Cain—from slavery to wars and bad governments in Africa—as manifestations of that curse. The only thing Christmas is perhaps more passionate about than reading (and writing) is her soul. She wants more than anything to go to heaven in the future (where she has been told that there would be an abundance of Wall’s vanilla ice cream and rooms full of books) and now she is reading that no matter how good she is, no matter how hard she tries, her soul is already doomed. There is no saving her, it seems, from perdition.

4

I WAS RAISED in a very strict Catholic home. The tussle for our souls was between the devil and my parents, and my parents were determined to win. And so everything—or almost everything—was censored. If the wrong kind of music came on the radio, the radio was turned off. Salt-N-Pepa’s “Let’s Talk about Sex, Baby” was my favorite for a while, but to be able to sing it, I had to replace “sex” with “bread.” Let’s talk about bread baby, let’s talk about you and me. Let’s talk about all the good things and the bad things we could bake. Let’s talk about bread. . .

The day my mother caught one of my elder sisters wearing a T-shirt with the print “Fantastic in Dark Places,” my sister got two choices: to bin the shirt or iron over the print. My sister, who liked the shirt—for the image of one of her favorite bands on its front—had to iron another print over the “Fantastic in Dark Places” so that the message was garbled, made no grammatical sense, but my mother—though usually punctilious about proper grammar—did not mind. Better to enter heaven with improper grammar than to dance all the way into hell with your i’s dotted and your t’s crossed.

Whatever films we watched on video were bought by my parents: *Jesus of Nazareth*, Parts 1–4; *The Sound of Music*; *The King and I*. When the first video club opened in Enugu, where we lived, and all our friends joined, we were not allowed to, because my parents could not be expected to watch each movie and decide whether it was right for us or not.

The only sphere where we had a certain kind of freedom was in what we read. My parents believed in the redeeming value of books. They encouraged us to read. They expected their friends who bought us books to choose books that were appropriate for us. There was no need to censor those. Sometimes, I told them about exciting things I had read. Sometimes I wrote my own stories, spin-offs mostly of what I had read (especially in the Enid Blyton books), and so I wrote about white children eating apples and having the adventures Blyton’s characters had. They had grandmothers who baked cakes because, as far as I was concerned, those were the only kind of characters valid enough to occupy books. All writing begins with imitation, after all.

My imitation lacked the scope to include characters like me, or a grandmother like mine who came from the village with bags of fruit covered in sand, and who would have thought wearing an apron while cooking a silly indulgence.

5

FOR MANY NIGHTS after reading the book with the devil on its cover, Christmas cannot sleep. When she tries to speak of this book to her parents, her tongue cleaves to her mouth and she cannot find the words. She does not have the maturity to question the injustice of being sent to hell for nothing that she has done. She has always thought of the written word as sacred: books—like parents—do not lie. The written word is too full of integrity to lie. And so it does not occur to her to question the legitimacy of the “facts” she has read. At night, she is haunted by the image of the devil chasing her with his pitchfork and mocking her. She begins again to bed-wet because she is too afraid, too burdened to get up at night to use the bathroom. She sleeps with the lights on, but it does very little to relieve her. She dreams of waking up miraculously white. If there was a way that she could scrub off her skin, no matter how long it took, she would do it. She tallies up all her good deeds: not lying; not cheating on tests even when the opportunities are there; praying; refusing the bribe given to her by an older sister with whom she goes to church to skip church for an afternoon visit at a friend’s. These are sacrifices she makes so that she would be assured heaven. But she sees how all those deeds, and all her goodness, fall limpid and inconsequential beside a fate that is already sealed by Cain’s murderous deed. If being good cannot save her, then what can?

6

I GREW UP in a middle-class family. What this means, in practical terms, is that I had access to good schools. One of the distinguishing features of “a good school” then (and I am fairly sure this is still the case in present-day Nigeria) is that “the use of vernacular is prohibited.” You were punished for using any language but English at school. In high school, French was compulsory as a second language. We learned French at school (enough to write essays) and in our final year, the three major Nigerian languages were introduced for the first time, but we were only supposed to learn how to count from one to ten. Nobody expected any of us to write exams in Igbo, Hausa, or Yoruba. I doubt any of us—even those of us who spoke our local languages fluently—would have been able to write a meaningful essay in them.

At school, in social studies class, we learned that the wife of a British administrator was named Nigeria. We learned that a European explorer, Mungo Park, discovered the River Niger. Whatever we learned of Nigeri-

ans taking an active part in Nigeria was limited to the patriots who fought for our independence. It was almost as if before then, before the English came in 1849 to colonize it, Nigeria was a huge void where nothing and nobody existed.

A few years ago, I ran a workshop for middle-school students in three different schools in Port Harcourt, Nigeria. These three were all private schools. They were all good schools. The students spent holidays in London and America. In each school, I asked the students to write the opening paragraph of a short story, introducing their protagonists to us. Without fail, all their protagonists had Western names. When we worked on settings, all their protagonists were in a foreign, non-African country. I changed tactics. I gave them the opening sentence. I made sure to use Nigerian names so that there would be no ambiguity. To my dismay, I still had Bola with “blue eyes, long silky hair, and a straight, pointed nose.” That was when it struck me how deeply rooted the problem was. Adichie had published *Purple Hibiscus* by then. Farafina was publishing novels by Nigerian writers accessible to middle-school students from homes where their parents could afford to buy these books. And yet a majority of these students could not imagine people like themselves occupying the spaces of their own stories. It also occurred to me how lucky I was to have discovered Achebe when I did. And why such discoveries should not have to depend on luck. I made a concerted effort in those schools to challenge the students to read other books, to imitate other kinds of writers. By the end of the workshop, 99.9 percent of them got it. That is one of the most rewarding things I have ever done.

7

A SHORT WHILE LATER, perhaps a week, perhaps two weeks after reading that book whose title Christmas has forgotten, serendipity throws Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* into her path. Reading it is like a spiritual experience. She will recognize later, when she is older and wiser, how it saves her. This book tells the story of a civilization and a community completely disrupted by the coming of the white man. Its protagonist, Okonkwo, is a warrior, a proud man whose life is completely ruined by the clash of civilizations that is brought by the English colonizers. For the first time in her life, she reads a book that shows her ancestors’ history does not begin with colonization, that her people had a world that was complete on its own, a world that did not seek validity outside of its own community. For the first time, colonization was presented as an intrusion, and not as something she ought to be grateful for.

Achebe writes in *TFA*, “The white man is clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act as one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart.”

That line . . . that line even at that age stands out for her. It consoles her. Its power is so transformative that she begins to question the veracity of the history lessons she has learned at school. She begins to see how ridiculous it is that someone would name a people that already existed; or “discover” a river that was not only already in existence but was being used by the locals. She also begins to understand the tragedy of punishing someone for speaking their mother tongue, and she begins to imagine a heaven from which her skin color does not preclude her, a world where everything she is is enough.

8

IN A 1994 INTERVIEW with the *Paris Review*, Achebe himself says, “When I began going to school and learned to read, I encountered stories of other people and other lands. In one of my essays, I remember the kind of things that fascinated me. Weird things, even, about a wizard who lived in Africa and went to China to find a lamp. . . . Fascinating to me because they were about things remote, and almost ethereal.

“Then I grew older and began to read about adventures in which I didn’t know that I was supposed to be on the side of those savages who were encountered by the good white man. I instinctively took sides with the white people. They were fine! They were excellent. They were intelligent. The others were not. . . they were stupid and ugly. That was the way I was introduced to the danger of not having your own stories. . . . Once I realized that, I had to be a writer. I had to be that historian.”

Discovering Achebe—and his protagonists who have Igbo names, and do things more identifiable to me than ice skating or a grandmother in an apron baking cakes—introduced me to that danger he spoke about. More importantly, it gave me the courage or perhaps the license to write my own stories. Nothing, in all my experience of literature since, has ever had as strong an effect on my sense of the sheer possibilities of writing.

9

CHRISTMAS COMES TO READING—and therefore to writing—with fresh eyes. She also begins to ask questions. There is a curiosity about the

past that has been awakened in her, even about her own family's past: the grandfather she never met who converted to Christianity in adulthood, and so began to eat cassava, which was considered as "Christian food, *nni ndi uka*"; her great-grandfather who was buried sitting down in the dead of the night because he was a titled man, but only after the family had pretended to bury him in an empty coffin so as not to get into trouble with the colonialists. There is a wealth of knowledge where she previously imagined none. Telling those stories: correcting the single story of Africa becomes important to her too. Her early writings reflect this: a passionate insistence on writing about the past. As if the present does not, should not, matter.

It takes time and some maturity and a transcontinental move and a homesickness that almost pulverizes her—it takes becoming invisible—before she realizes that the present and the future are as important as the past. That in fiction, there is enough space for interrogations not just of how the "other" sees us but of how we see ourselves, and how we see the "other." And she learns something else: that empathy for others, even others unlike yourself, can only be achieved when you begin to believe that you are as valid, as worthy of celebration, as the other.

IO

FOR THE WRITERS who come after Achebe, there is a recognition of Achebe's role in making us, not just writers, but the kind of writers that we are. In the words of Toni Morrison, he opened doors for us. From Flora Nwapa, whose *Efuru*, published four years after *Things Fall Apart*, gives us a female protagonist who is to a large extent antithetical to Okonkwo's wives in *Things Fall Apart*, to Buchi Emecheta, who published in the '80s and continues the tradition of strong female protagonists, to the present generation of writers, my fellow travelers: such audacious adventurers, with such intrepidity of vision, such a heroic penchant for the tremendous that they are discombobulating the erstwhile notion of African literature as a homogenous, almost anthropological genre, quite distinct from and certainly ranked lower than its Western counterpart, a particular kind of commodity for a particular market. There is less anxiety about how the world sees Africa than with how Africa sees itself. The relative explosion of African writers present on the global stage is not a coincidence. In a 2000 interview with Ernest Emenyonu, Achebe says that he hopes that the twenty-first century will bring African writing fully into the arena of world literature. The present explosion is the

fulfilling of that hope. One of the most hopeful Igbo proverbs tells us that the chicken scratches ahead and scratches behind, and she asks her children which is better. The implication is that the future is greater than the past (or the present). And it is today an honor for me to be an active participant in that present.

II

IN THIS STORY, there is a happy ending.