The Future is Exceptionally Bright for African Literature: Darlington Chibueze in Conversation with Chimezie Chika

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Earlier in the year, literary conversationist and writer Darlington Chibueze Anuonye discussed issues on African literature with Chimezie Chika, editor at *Ngiga Review*. The conversation is anchored on their shared admiration for the writer and literary scholar Isidore Diala and the playwright Esiaba Irobi.

Darlington: In 2010, the eminent Nigerian literary critic Ernest Emenyonu included Diala in his shortlist of "a young crop of strong literary scholars in Nigeria" equipped to succeed the older generation of literary scholars (145). Four years later, Diala won the NLNG Prize for Literary Criticism with his essay, "Colonial Mimicry and Postcolonial Re-membering in Isidore Okpewho's *Call Me by My Rightful Name*," an original article that draws attention to the ingenuity of Okpewho's decisive novel which, in Diala's words, "harnesses the distinctive virtues of the African imagination and worldview to both complement and interrogate Western paradigms of knowledge" (77). He was awarded the criticism prize again in 2018 for his article "Bayonets and the Carnage of Tongues: The Contemporary Speaking Truth to Power." For this feat, Diala may well be regarded as the Nigerian literary critic of the decade 2010 to 2019. Having learned at the hallowed feat of this extraordinarily brilliant teacher, what do you consider his defining virtues as a scholar?

Chimezie: In "Colonial Mimicry," Diala illuminates Okpewho's multifarious application of oral techniques and magical realism to interrogate the postcolonial search for identity as represented in the

concept of a name and the corollary of history revealed in the metonymic relationship of a name to a person's cultural identity. One look at Diala's 2018 NLNG Prize-winning essay shows the scholar at his erudite and painstaking best, examining different instances of resistance and revolution in the poetry of Nigerian creative writers speaking against tyranny amidst certain danger and state persecution. Diala crucially captures the characteristic resilience of the Nigerian poet in his steadfast iconoclasm against the ruling powers despite the looming possibility of retribution. You will find out that Nigerian poets have no choice but to be that forthright. Diala's immense ability to conjure up springs of knowledge from unknown wells, his delight, nay entrancement, when elaborating the nature of such knowledge, is remarkable. It takes a tremendous amount of erudition to do that. I consider myself lucky to have been taught by him.

Darlington: Speaking of luck, in a 2012 interview with Ezechi Onyerionwu, Nigerian poet and scholar Niyi Osundare described himself as a fortunate teacher to have taught Diala and his generation of students. Osundare confessed: "Teaching is an eternal dialogue […] I remember my many students of many years ago today and the kind of interactions I had with them, and those interactions are part of my consciousness" (185). The beautiful remarks of a teacher on their students are usually humbling, but the feeling one gets reading a student's tribute to their deserving teachers, like "The Master of the Classroom," your essay on Diala, defies every form that words can take. I read the essay and thought: "what further height can gratitude reach?" Then I remembered how Diala's commitment to the drama of Irobi motivated a friend of mine to wish for supernatural powers so she could resurrect the playwright.

Chimezie: You know, Darlington, when you reached out to me on your project on teachers, soliciting my contribution, there was only one thought on my mind: "who was that one teacher I would want to celebrate, to actually thank for existing?" The answer was a straightforward one. Diala is a teacher like no other; through his teaching I have learnt what it means to be rigorous with research. I admire his immense erudition, highly inspired scholarship and the aura of his personality. It is sad how teachers suffer near-erasure in our national life. No one gives teachers their trophies, but they remain the most important people in the development of any society. A society's advancement can be measured by the value they place on their teachers.

Diala's interest in Irobi is nothing short of a fixation. His intimate and literary interests in Irobi's personality, his acute understanding of Irobi's work as well as his summation of such understanding in Irobi's social and human experiences are deeply engaging. Diala's *Esiaba*

Irobi's Drama and the Postcolony is not only a daring statement on Irobi's life and work but also a heartfelt pean to a man so more than sung. I am therefore grateful to be a recipient of such a deep understanding of Irobi's personality. More importantly, through Diala's efforts, I now regard Irobi as the absolute vanguard of a generation of angry and politically charged Nigerian writers—mostly now exiled—who came of age in the late 1980s and early '90s. These include Olu Oguibe, Chris Abani, and others.

Darlington: Irobi's understanding of Europe's exploitative voyage to Africa is enlightening. In *Cemetery Road*, for instance, he is upset with the Western media and their distorted vision of Africa. For him, the Western media are in a hurry to pass a negative judgment on Africa but neglect to capture the continent's endowments; chronicle the anguish of the people but ignore both the cruelty of the government and the dauntless efforts of the people to stand up against murderous regimes. The problem with the West is not that it is interested in Africa but that that interest is loaded with negative assumptions of Africans as a dying people who must be redeemed from the backwardness of their culture. Who saves a people from their culture? You can only rescue someone, if they invite you, from the arrogance and ridicule of foreign cultures threatening to uproot and dislocate them from their own land. But the Western media do not show the world our resilience in the face of the shooting pain we endure daily as we reclaim our broken selves. And if they must capture us at all, their choice would have to be that moment when we are downcast. It is then you will see the West pose as the savior of Africa.

Essentially, Irobi bequeaths to us an avant-garde theater that audaciously interrogates Europe's presence in Africa. I think it is crucial that we follow his steps in making a distinction between interest and love. That you're interested in me doesn't mean you love me; that you tell my story doesn't mean you understand my history; you may wish to announce to the world that I have no voice, or that my voice lacks power; that you share the images of my struggle doesn't mean you're sympathetic to my condition; you may wish to broadcast my vulnerability, draw attention to yourself and use the dividends of the media traffic to empower the institutions that have blatantly held me down. The West may not understand Africa, may never tell a complete and honest African story until it shifts its attention from the Africa engraved in its imagination—a people ruined by their lack of wisdom in rejecting colonialism and neocolonial intrusions—and creates an opening for a more humane and progressive conversation that will acknowledge the complexity of the human race.

Chimezie: Always a firebrand, Irobi is not one to keep silent in the face of neocolonial tyranny. He is a thorn in the flesh of military buffoons

hell-bent on dragging the country, their country, to the precipice. His literary interventions into this issue are many. *Cemetery Road*, for which he won the 2010 NLNG Prize for Drama, is a postmodernist grilling of the negative effects of neocolonial incursions in Africa. Mazeli becomes the quintessential martyr of a failed state and the sacrificial lamb of tyranny and revolt. Irobi has Marxist propensities. He believes in a political revolution of the youth that will oust the institutionalized gerontocracy that rules this nation. Sadly, such a drastic view is almost inapplicable to the socio-cultural context of our milieu. But it is evident in his work, from *Nwokedi* to *The Other Side of the Mask.*

If we consider where Irobi is coming from, his life experiences, his unconventional sojourn at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, what emerges before us is a man who was conscious of the mission of his art from his earliest days as an artist. One can point to that biographical index in the play, *The Other Side of the Mask*. That play, perhaps, represents Irobi's greatest artistic accomplishment—the alchemy of the personal and the public, a deep and objective manifestation of his artistic purpose. Consider also the passion evident in the writing. Of course, one must also acknowledge that all Irobi's works are signatories of his ruling passion. Irobi always exhibits a passionate engagement with his topic and audience.

Irobi has been placed within the context of postcolonial anger, which is a kind of literature that springs from a moral vindictiveness to right wrongs, a signal iconoclasm as the voice of the oppressed, and a revolutionary stance that sometimes borders on outright violence. In his study of Irobi's plays, Leon Osu remarks on the "psychodramatic portraiture" of characters "bitterly going against their oppressors" (151). It is the truth that Irobi's plays are replete with violent panacea as the solution to public and private issues. Irobi's revolutionary literary interventions are a manifestation of his deep disappointment with the Nigerian experiment.

Darlington: Your depiction of Irobi is befitting. Remarkably, it is through Lawani's question to Douglas and Douglas' response that we participate in Irobi's revolutionary vision in *Cemetery Road* as well as witness the drama of conscience and retribution between Africa and Europe: "What has sugar got to do with slavery, tell me, Douglas?" Lawani asked. "From the sugar," he asserted sternly, "England became rich, became the envy of the world […] From slavery came so much money that you named your currency, the guinea […] From the same fund you built Lloyds and Barclays Bank" (125-126). The consequence of Europe's contact with Africa, as Lawani's comments show, is destructive. But Douglas puts up a defence for Europe, arguing that "Africans also participated in the slave trade. They

captured their fellow Africans from the hinterland and led them to the coast and slave ships. Some of them sold twelve men for a bottle of whiskey. Others sold thirteen women for a mirror or a box of matches" (126). It is phenomenal that Irobi uses most of his characters as masks in his daring attempt to expose the evils of neocolonialism and the cluelessness of Africa's past military regimes.

Chimezie: Definitely! Irobi's blistering presence can be felt all over his work. In Mazeli's character, he accentuates, to the level of apotheosis, the image of the artist-activist as an exemplary fighter of a just cause. The just cause being the total annihilation of the political and military ruling class. Irobi's temperament rubs off on his characters because we find that they are iconoclasts dissatisfied with the politico-social status quo. Mazeli's character, then, is basically an epitome of the people's desire for freedom from stringent political and neocolonial forces. He represents the common man and his aspirations, the common man who is deprived of his destiny in a failed state.

Darlington: In *The Other Side of the Mask*, as in *Cemetery Road*, Irobi, following the dramatic tradition of Wole Soyinka, creates a syncretic theater. What is the impact of such synchrony between African and Western theatrical traditions?

Chimezie: The impact of such blending is far-reaching, especially in Modern African Drama. Irobi's work, as a reinterpretation of Soyinka's work, recuperates Igbo culture and tradition in modern drama. A close perusal of such plays as *Nwokedi* and *The Other Side of the Mask* establishes the fact that the use of traditional motifs and symbols subsumed in modern dramatic techniques and theories creates a wholly inclusive dramaturgy. Irobi's oeuvre examines the extent to which Igbo culture can contain Western culture, its consequences and results. He is also stating directly, in applying this technique, that drama has always existed in Africa but can attain its full potential when married to European dramatic techniques. This is more or less Echeruo's argument in "The Dramatic Limits of Igbo Ritual."

Darlington: In his drama, Irobi draws immensely from the cultural potentials of Igbo masks to construct as well as execute his revolutionary ideal. Diala put it brilliantly in his remark that Irobi's

> deep anchorage in the oral tradition of his Igbo ethnic group, its rituals of self-renewal, myths and legends of enigmatic and daring deity-heroes, its lore of the mysteries of life and transcendence of the human spirit, its rousing chants, masquerades, and dramaturgy remained the indispensable source of [his] creative imagination and critical thinking. (20)

Think of Mazeli's devotion to the mask in *Cemetery Road* and his boldness to confront power even at the expense of his life and you would marvel at the incredible ability of the mask to deify mortals, offering, at least, a sense of immortality. Mazeli identifies the mask as the last hope of the people and that, in every sense, is Irobi's signification of the crucial place of culture in the attainment of political emancipation in Africa.

Chimezie: The mask is an important symbol in African culture. Suffice it to say that a mask is, in traditional terms, representative of the wise spirit of our fathers. It also signifies the other/hidden part of every individual, the part that is buried deep in our unconsciousness, sequestered from our conscious selves. The Mask also points to the deity *ofo na ogu*, the Igbo god of retributive justice. Irobi's application of the mask philosophy in his drama is laudable, in that it not only awakens our awareness of the regenerative power of cultural beliefs but also problematizes the mask as a tool for political correction. Irobi uses the mask to symbolize the activist orientation of his characters in a politically dysfunctional society, meting out deserved justice to the corrupt political officials, as we see in Mazeli's attempt to lynch the Head of State. For Mazeli to do this, he loses his identity and becomes the retributive god. In other words, he crosses the space between the human and the spirit worlds and acquires the power to mete out justice. This liminality is a motif in most African cultures. Soyinka has also used this motif in his dramaturgy, most evidently in *Death and the King's Horseman*, where Elesin Oba performs the ritual suicide marked by a series of customary procedures crescendoed by that ritualistic crossing from human life to spirit life. Mind you, death is not final in most African cultures, nay in Igbo and Yoruba cultures. This liminality between the conscious and the unconscious, life and death, human and spirit world, is massively bridged through the mask. Thus, the mask becomes the all-seeing tool that does not shrink away from power. It attacks power through a revolution. Bloodshed by masks in *Nwokedi*, *The Other Side of the Mask* and *Cemetery Road* is seen as a sacrifice for the ultimate cleansing of the land.

Darlington: You put it so eloquently. The cultural values of masks are inestimable. Remember that the *egwugwu* of Umuofia in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* function as respected adjudicators of the land, listening to complaints, giving verdicts and meting out punishments. In pre-colonial Igbo societies, the legal system established by masks and masquerade cults allowed for the ascendancy of justice. But it appears that in writing *The Other Side of the Mask*, Irobi offered an apocalyptic prophecy over his own life. Do you consider the striking similarity in the manner of the deaths of Irobi and Jamike as that final, inescapable destination of a faithful writer, who

must follow his muse to the end of all things—sacred and mundane? Or is it just a coincidence?

Chimezie: Irobi, to my thinking, is an immensely prophetic writer. *Hangmen Also Die* buttresses this fact. *The Other Side of the Mask* is no less a signal prophetic text. At the time when Irobi wrote it, he was bitter at so many things: the government, the academy, the literary establishment. We know all these from reading Diala's scholarly and biographical study of Irobi. So Irobi, in his bitterness, wrote a literary response as an artist. He was overtly angry that in spite of his prodigious efforts, outputs, and talents, he was not duly recognized by the literary establishment. He was also bitter at being largely ignored in the diaspora. So, you see, it's a personality thing. Irobi was someone who loved to attract attention, so when he failed to get it, he suffered greatly psychologically.

So, in *The Other Side of the Mask*, Jamike's artistic commitment is a paradigmatic replication of Irobi's desires as an artist. Irobi, from both Diala's study and several interviews, comes across as excessively and obsessively devoted as we find in Jamike's life in his studio. In the end, Jamike kills and dies for his art, even if he sees this death as the ultimate fulfillment of his life. In fact, Jamike's obsessive fixation on getting so much work done in so short time could be located in his belief that his lifeblood is short or that, at the point of his death, his tryst with Amadioha and fate would have come round again, and that he had done nothing in life but use up his short lifeblood, his *chi*, in creating immortal masterworks. So much could be said for Irobi.

Darlington: Definitely, and Diala deserves many thanks for documenting Irobi's life and work.

It feels good to live in a time when words are overtaking the world and literature is educating humanity beyond the possible realities of our immediate environment and race. Still, the misrepresentation of blackness in Western literature is one plague that continues to reinstate the base perception of the West about Africa, and this angered Irobi so much that he had to rewrite William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. In Shakespeare's *Othello* we find an honest and prosperous Moor whose undoing is the blackness of his skin, just as we encounter Caliban in *The Tempest*, a character so maligned in literature. What are the continuing implications of these stereotypes and how would you appraise Irobi's contribution in repudiating them?

Chimezie: The misrepresentation and othering of Blacks within the larger body of European literature can be traced as far back as ancient Greek and Roman literature, where witches and slaves are described as "black-skinned" or "black-hearted." In any case, black has become over time a most repulsive and unsavory term. This negative

perception of Africa has long been there in all aspects of life. Before the voyages of discovery between the 15th and 16th centuries opened the eyes of the world to hitherto unknown geographies and cultures, Africa was condescendingly referred to, using the same denigrating imagery of "black," as the dark continent not only because Europeans knew little about it but also because it was presumed that dark-skinned homo erectuses lived there. This view gained ascendancy when the voyagers who came to Africa went back to Europe with outlandish tales of black-skinned people with an eye in the middle of their forehead, people who walked upside down, dark lands that never saw the light of day, and so many other ridiculous stories from Europeans captured in Alvin O. Thompson's essay, "Race and Colour Prejudices and the Origin of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade." Coming from such a historical milieu, African writers are indeed obligated to correct such misconceptions and misrepresentations about Africa, its peoples, and its cultures. Achebe's works were geared towards the correction and rebranding of the negative view of Africa. Many other writers followed suit, vehemently stating that Africans have dignity, culture, and a way of doing things. It is pertinent to state that our life did not begin with European "discoveries." Mungo Park merely saw the Niger that millions of others saw before him. David Livingstone did not "discover" the Fall in the upper Zambezi, Shona people did. The Boers did not come to an empty land in 1652. They met advanced Zulu, Xhosa, and Tswana civilizations. So, you see, the African writer has a lot of work to do in reordering the view of Africa as the "other." Shakespeare mirrored the trend of his time by portraying black characters in his dramatic works—Meredith Anne Skura's erudite essay, "Discourse and the Individual: The Case of Colonialism in *The Tempest*," sheds more light on this. It is contentious as to whether these portrayals were positive or negative. The important thing though is that Shakespeare was among the first European writers to acknowledge the existence of blacks—the cultural "other"—in his works, as we see in *The Tempest*, *Othello*, and others. For instance, Othello and Caliban, who is not necessarily black but represents all colonially oppressed peoples, are epitomes and archetypes of what was supposed to be the essence of the African person. In other words, we have little sense of discernment and are nothing short of beasts, who must be thankful for the refining influence of our European overlords, who then, in the messianic spirit of "refining" us, went on to summarily destroy our heritage and human dignity.

Irobi's literary intervention is just one in a dignified line of such rewritings of European classics by African writers and intellectuals. For instance, Soyinka's *The Bacchae* (Euripides' *Bacchae*), Efua T. Sutherland's *Edufa* (Sophocles' *Antigone*), Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame* (Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*), and others. Irobi's *Sycorax* creates an alternate situation in which European domination is

repelled. In *Sycorax*, Irobi is of the opinion that the development of non-European civilization has existed prior to European incursion. The African is the initiator of civilization here and not the other way round; he takes the position of the altern and not the subaltern. He manages to control vast powers and strange arts which he uses to enforce his identity upon the rather innocuous Europeans. Using the techniques of dance-drama and postmodernist play-within-play, Irobi revises and interrogates common postcolonialist tropes. What is important is that he continues the conversation on European cultural perceptions of the supposed third world.

Darlington: I followed the debate on Facebook in 2018, in which Ulff Lehmann claimed that writing is new in Africa, unlike in the West, and that this is responsible for the supposed inability of African writers to advance written literature.[1] What are your thoughts on Lehmann's statement?

Chimezie: First, it hadn't crossed my mind that there could still be such chronically parochial characters as Lehmann. I mean, people are supposed to be more enlightened in the age of the Internet. It is almost like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's incredulity when asked at La Nuit des Idées in Paris on 25 January 2018 if Nigeria had libraries. Such presumption by the West is a sad paradigm that mars literary discourses between the West and Africa. There's a tweet by Eketi (@eketiette), calling out white people who still know so little about Africa that they think it is a huge unexplored country ridden with intertribal wars, man-eating savages and wild animals. This says a lot about the expectation of the average white person regarding Africa.

I can't believe we are still having this conversation in this age. One would have thought the world has moved beyond such parochialism; sadly, we are still fighting the same wars that our forebears fought. What Achebe criticized in, among other things, Joseph Conrad's fiction, is still alive and well. In Achebe's words, Africa is still even today very much, in the eyes of the West, "a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality" (Achebe 783). This is beyond sad. It means that the derogatory view of Africa by the West has calcified. They expect nothing more from Africa. They turn a blind eye to developmental efforts and good news about Africa or even anything that negates their condescending vision of Africa. They hanker after bad news or anything that proves their thesis that Africa is a country with savages and all that nonsense. It is beyond annoying how some white people wonder how Africans can even operate complicated technology gadgets or know how to use a water tap. I mean, do these people really think we still live in huts and wear animal skins? Do they really think

we have inchoate brains? One wonders whether the world is really moving backward or forward. This is disappointing.

Even the literary space is not spared. In 2011, the critic and social media influencer, Ikhide Ikheloa, criticized the Caine Prize for peddling a single story of Africa by shortlisting and awarding mostly stories that tell a negative story of Africa: of hunger, disease, wars, slums, vagrants, etc., which is really what the West wants to hear about Africa (Ikhide 2012). In fact, certain notable voices have contemplated that it seems the quickest way to achieve literary success is by pandering to the patronizing Western view. While reviewing NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* in the *Guardian UK* in 2014, Nigerian novelist, Helon Habila, complained about the palpable presence of what he called a veritable "Caine Prize Aesthetic" in the novel, the idea of poor urchins in African cities and such like (par. 2). While Habila may have been too harsh on that rather excellent novel by Bulawayo, I think he makes some valid points, especially when one considers his statement against the background of recent Caine Prize shortlists. Regrettably, the parochial range of the stories certainly does not represent "African Writing," for which the Caine Prize claims it is awarding the prize.

That social media debate to which you refer is unfortunate. Mr Lehmann is a whitesplainer who does not deserve the dignity of a reply. Almost everything I have said so far contradicts his basic argument, which in essence is that African literature could hardly amount to anything. Unfortunately, he bases his argument on the etymology of writing. He describes writing alone as art. How ridiculous! And this is coming from someone who confessed self-consciously to having read so little of African literature. Such prejudiced arguments are almost non-sequiturs. In my angry riposte I tried to point out that literature as art does not entirely depend on writing. The emphasis is on the manner, the style, the peculiar way in which words are strung up, spoken or written. Lehmann's rather narrow view eschews oral literature, denying the existence of much of world literature. I found myself recalling the bigoted older man that Achebe describes in "An Image of Africa." Like that unfortunate man, Lehmann sees what he does not say and says what he does not see. That is sad too.

Darlington: Literature possesses the power to inform. I just hope Lehmann will avail himself of a refining touch. What is the future of African literature?

Chimezie: African literature is alive and well. More than ever, several African authors are being read the world over. Some, like Yaa Gyasi, Imbolo Mbue, Taye Selasi and Chukwuebuka Ibeh, have secured mega deals for debut novels. Adichie's fame has gone even beyond literature.

I love Ayobami Adebayo with all the strength in me. Prizes in Africa are also discovering new talents. The Brunel International African Poetry Prize, The Caine Prize, Short Story Day Africa, The Commonwealth, and The Miles Morland Foundation Writing Scholarship have discovered several young writers of my generation. There is Akwaeke Emezi, Otosirieze Obi-Young, Arinze Ifekandu, Gbenga Adesina, Nnamdi Oguike, Romeo Oriogun, Chibuihe Obi-Achimba, and so many others. These are young writers vehemently opposing the status quo, writers writing what they want to write and not what they think people would want them to write. People unabashedly owning themselves. Literary renegades. The literary establishment is robust with constant debates. Journals like *Lolwe, Isele, Agbowo*, *Brittle Paper*, *Omenana*, and *Dgeku*, are doing excellent jobs. There are also literary festivals and book fairs such as Ake, LABAF; Writivism did some great work in the recent past; there's Storymoja Festival too. The future is exceptionally bright for African literature. There is no doubt about that.

Darlington: Speaking of prizes, in spite of its huge financial reward of $100,000, it appears the NLNG-funded Nigerian Prize for Literature does not confer on its winners the kind of symbolic cultural capital that prizes like the Caine and Commonwealth organized and funded by the West bestow. In his recent article, "The Nigerian Prize for Literature and Current Nigerian Writing: Politics, Process and the Price of Literary Legitimation," Diala declared that the Nigerian Prize for Literature has come of age and therefore is subject to evaluation. How would you assess the impact of the prize so far?

Chimezie: The Nigerian Prize for Literature has come a long way, no doubt. It is arguably the richest literary prize in Africa. Prizes have a special place in the legitimization of a literary canon. This is why famous prizes such as the Pulitzer, the Booker, and the Nobel are representative of the best American, British and World literatures. Apart from the monetary gain, prizes situate a literary work firmly within a canon of literature that represents the best on offer and thus establishes the author's name.

Over the years, a number of good writers have won the Nigerian Prize for Literature. The issue however, as many people have stated previously, is the lack of what you refer to as the symbolic cultural capital. A prize is not all about the prize money. That is not enough. What is the infrastructure surrounding the prize? Where are the readings, the festivals, the interviews, the collaborations with libraries, bookshops, and the media? These are the infrastructural framework that gives a prize immense standing and legitimacy. For instance, the winner of the Booker Prize receives £50000 as prize money but the winning book is sure to go on to sell hundreds of thousands of copies.

The reason is because of the prestigious cultural capital attached to the prize. This is where the Nigerian Prize for Literature must improve if it is to grow beyond a mere monetary reward. Notice that most winners of the prize are hard to find in bookshops, let alone sell in their thousands. Some of the winners might even be out of print and this is unacceptable. Some time ago, I had a hard time finding a hardcopy of Kaine Agary's *Yellow Yellow*, the 2008 winner.

To improve the prize infrastructure and cultural capital, the Nigerian Prize for Literature should establish and sponsor literary festivals, colloquiums, readings, and writers residencies. In distribution, they should collaborate with the academia in Nigeria and beyond; they could also collaborate with schools, libraries, bookshops and other relevant bodies. It should not end with collaborations; they should be actively involved in establishing and funding these institutions where they do not exist. Prizes are not defined by prize money but by the prestigious cultural capital attached to them. Prizes such as the Hugo and the Nebula, given to the best science fiction works, do not even have prize money. However, the mere act of winning them catapults a book to critical acclaim and bestseller lists. Thus, if these recommendations are properly put in place, we will see winners of the prize selling thousands of copies of their books.

Darlington: You're right, and I hope the prize governing body pays attention to these necessary details and help give the award the prestige it truly deserves so that it could, in turn, give sufficient visibility to its winners and shortlistees.

Let me end this conversation by asking what you think about the transition of African literature from print to media. In the last decade, contemporary African writers have deployed social media to tell their stories. They are also publishing in important online magazines and journals. In a recent interview with Ikheloa, he said to me that the future of African literature is digital. What are your observations about the digitalization of African literature?

Chimezie: Over the years, Ikheloa has been a vocal advocate of the digitalization of African literature. His central mantra is that the traditional book, as we know it, is dead, replaced by social media and blogs. There is no pessimism in his declarations; instead he sees a new dawn for literature in which Facebook posts and tweets are standard quotidian literature.

Now, the truth is that I do not agree with the school of thought that declares that the book is dead and I certainly do not entirely agree with Ikheloa's extreme views. However, there is certainly a lot of sense in what he is saying if one views it from a developmental point of view. The delivery of literature is improved by leveraging newer technology.

That does not discount the original but enhances its availability. The Internet has shrunk the world and we now have easier access to things that were difficult many years ago. Everything is moving online, there are online versions of physical companies, bistros, etc. African literature is very vibrant in the social media and online space. In the past few years, a lot of magazines have been established and are doing well within the online space and even physical sessions via workshops, bookshops, and literary festivals. The future African literature, in terms of digital maximization, is indeed bright.

Darlington: I've been inspired by your sense of hope. May these words overtake us.

Chimezie: Certainly, there are words that overtake mortality. And the pleasure, as always, is mine, Darlington.

Notes

1. It appears Ulff Lehmann eventually deleted that post, as it is no longer available online. The conversation took place in May, 2018.

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