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REVIEW ESSAY:
CHIGOZIE OBIOMA'S MULTILINGUAL ORCHESTRA

An Orchestra of Minorities

by Chigozie Obioma

Little, Brown, 2019. 464 pages.

Chigozie Obioma does not allow the fact that he came to English after Yoruba and Igbo to bridle his style. Instead, he exults in the resources of his adopted language, proclaiming – in an essay called “The Audacity of Prose” – his kinship with fellow translanguals such as Chinua Achebe, Joseph Conrad, Vladimir Nabokov, Arundhati Roy, Salman Rushdie, and Wole Soyinka – “all those writers who, in most of their works, float enthusiastically on blasted chariots of prose, and whose literary horses are high on poetic steroids” (2015). Short-listed for the Man Booker Prize, Obioma’s debut novel, *The Fishermen* (2015), is an elaborate tale about the prophecies and profligacies that tear four young brothers apart in the Nigerian town of Akure. His expansive second novel, *An Orchestra of Minorities*, flaunts the intricacies of Igbo cosmology and the sinuosities of its sumptuous sentences. Its own epic ambitions are underlined by a reference to a movie version of *The Odyssey*, whose plot seems to promise a resolution that this dark novel refuses to fulfill.

It is the story of Chinonso Solomon Olisa, a 24-year-old poultry farmer in Umuahia, in Igboland, southeastern Nigeria. One evening, driving his van across a bridge over the Imo River, he observes a distraught young woman who, jilted by a lover, is about to fling herself into the flood. Unlike Jean-Baptiste Clamence, who keeps walking rather than try to save a desperate woman pitching herself off the Pont Royal in Albert Camus’s *La Chute*, Chinonso takes action to avert the suicide.

Eventually, he and the grateful woman, Ndali Obialor, fall deeply in love. However, the course of their true love runs anything but smooth. Whereas Chinonso has a limited education and makes a modest living selling eggs and chickens, Ndali is the wealthy, college-educated daughter of an Igbo chief. Both her haughty father and her malicious brother violently oppose the couple's plan to marry.

Determined to prove himself worthy of Ndali, Chinonso resolves to earn a college degree. He is persuaded by Jamike Nwaorji, a former schoolmate, that he can achieve that educational distinction in a mere three years if he goes off to Nikosia and enrolls in Cyprus International University, located in the Turkish sector of a divided island Jamike extols as “very small, but very beautiful; very beautiful, mehn” (140). Promising to make all the arrangements for tuition and room and board, Jamike takes Chinonso's life savings, and promptly disappears. Chinonso nevertheless shows up at CIU – where Obioma himself studied, before earning an MFA at the University of Michigan – but treeless Cyprus proves anything but beautiful, the Cypriots turn out to be racist, and his education becomes a painful lesson in compound catastrophe. Chinonso, who is easily scammed and also does many other doltish things, is what, in a language unlike Igbo, might be called a *schlemiel*.

A technical novelty of *An Orchestra of Minorities* is that it is narrated not by the author and not by Chinonso but by the protagonist's *chi*, a guardian spirit who accompanies its mortal host throughout his lifetime. The *chi* takes an active interest in its host's welfare but, though it may insinuate subtle suggestions into his mind, it is powerless to intercede in the host's actions. The novel takes the form of an elaborate petition to Chukwu, “creator of all” (3), to allow Chinonso's soul, despite all his transgressions, entrance into “the domain of the ancestors” (3). Though the *chi*'s testimony to Chukwu – a.k.a. Egbunu, Oseburuwa, Ezewa, Ebubedike, Gaganaogwu, and several other names and honorifics – is rendered in elegant English, we are presumably to believe that it is actually delivered in what throughout the novel is referred to as “the language of the fathers”: Igbo. We read the story in English, through a linguistic scrim.

The *chi* begins one chapter by noting that “the early fathers say in their peripatetic wisdom that one's own language is never difficult” (192). Many isolingual writers (those who write in only one language) would disagree, contending that writing well even in one's primary language demands extraordinary talent, discipline, and luck. “Writing a book is a horrible, exhausting struggle, like a long bout of some painful illness,” wrote George Orwell in his native English, the medium of all his essays and books. “One would never undertake such a thing if one were not driven on by some demon whom one can neither resist nor understand” (Orwell 2000: 7). The story Obioma tells is driven by an anxious man's compulsion to prove himself. It is narrated by a daemon, who like the multilingual author himself, is particularly sensitive to the role of language in human affairs.

Language is one of the most conspicuous ways in which class distinctions create barriers between Chinonso and Ndali. Though we are told that, in the school the farmer attended as a child, “it was a punishable offense to speak an ‘African language’” (139) – similar to the way Mexican American students have been punished for speaking Spanish in schools in the American Southwest, and American Indian children were disciplined for speaking their native tongue in the government or church boarding schools they were forced to attend –, Chinonso is uncomfortable speaking English, what he calls “the language of the White man” (139). He would much rather speak Igbo, the language of the fathers. However, one of the first things that strikes him about Ndali, who is studying for a degree in pharmacy and has spent a few years in England, is her fluent command of English. As his *chi* explains: “He found her intimidating, not only her presence but also her facility with this language, which he rarely used” (38). Sometimes Chinonso converses with her or others in a pidgin that is not quite either English or Igbo. For example, when he asks a storekeeper whether he knows Ndali’s family, the storekeeper replies: “An, yes-yes. I sabi them well-well” (421). However, the fact that most conversations between Ndali and Chinonso are conducted in English puts him at a distinct disadvantage and exacerbates his sense of social inferiority.

In Cyprus, Chinonso does not understand the ambient Turkish, and his inability to communicate with local officials and merchants heightens his feeling of alienation. He hears Cypriots refer to him as *arap* and eventually learns that it is a pejorative term they apply to someone of darker skin. Unlike English, Turkish is not what Chinonso calls “the language of the White man,” but neither is it a language that a black man from Nigeria comprehends. There are very few Africans in Nikosia, and Chinonso’s unusual appearance singles him out for racist reactions. Children mistake him for the Brazilian footballer Ronaldo, but he is also called a slave and accosted by strange women who want to touch his frizzy hair. In addition, he is befriended, though later betrayed, by a nurse named Fiona, an expatriate German citizen who sometimes adds her native language to the babel perplexing and vexing Chinonso.

Pungent Igbo proverbs scattered throughout the work allow the *chi* to reflect on his host’s actions while adding to its rich stylistic texture. When Chinonso unwisely accepts an invitation to attend the posh gala to celebrate the birthday of Ndali’s snobbish father, the narrator reminds us that “a mouse cannot run into an empty mousetrap in broad daylight unless it has been drawn to the trap by something it could not refuse” (110). When, on the flight to Cyprus, Chinonso realizes that he has been fleeced, he is unable to think of anything else, and the *chi* observes that “. . . the great fathers often say that a toad whose mouth is full of water cannot swallow even an ant” (184). And when Chinonso insists on doing something that seems irrational, another batrachian proverb explains that there must be an explanation: “. . . a toad in full daylight does not run for nothing” (429). The network of vatic adages that pervade the text constitutes almost another foreign language, one that, to his woe, the protagonist cannot comprehend.

Obioma draws the title of his novel from an Igbo phrase. After a hawk swoops down and makes off with one of his beloved chickens, Chinonso is moved by the collective crying of the surviving fowl. He explains to Ndali that his late father told him that the plaintive sound “Is like a burial song for the one that has gone. He called it *Egwu umu-obere-ihe*. You understand? I don’t know *umu-obere-ihe* in English.” Offering a translation, Ndali at first suggests “Little things,” but then she corrects herself: “No, minorities.” Chinonso replies: “Yes, yes, that is so. That is the translation my father said. That’s how he said it in English: minorities. He was always saying it is like their ‘okestra” (81). Thus, *An Orchestra of Minorities* emerges out of an imperfect translation from Igbo and the faulty pronunciation of an English noun. It refers not only to the plangent weeping of little winged creatures but also to the cosmic dirge that accompanies Chinonso’s calamitous life. If not for his lowly social status and his ineptitude, Chinonso, who heaps destruction upon himself and others, would satisfy the Aristotelian definition of tragic hero. It is noteworthy that Obioma, no doubt sensitized by his own translanguaging to the gaps between languages, chooses to use languages as the source of estrangement. His title, an Igbo phrase denoting the mournful music of the universe, also underlines the untranslatability of language.

Ultimately, fate itself becomes a language. The concatenation of actions that propel him to disaster remains even more of a mystery than Turkish to pitiful Chinonso. Not the least of his misfortunes is his ignorance of the mechanism of misfortune. His *chi*’s petition to the primal creator for mercy on his host explains that: “He did not know, Egbunu, that fate was a strange language which the life of a man and his *chi* are never able to learn” (125). Human experience as an inscrutable language is undeniably a fitting metaphor for an author writing in an adopted tongue.

Works Cited

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