

BIG WORDS

Lagos, 2011. Twenty writers work on their skills under the expert guidance of Chimamanda Adichie. 'It's a bit like meeting Michael Jackson.'

FEMKE VAN ZEIJL

'Tap tap tap.' Her typing was getting to me. I detested it. I distracted myself by staring around. The dreadfully cold room was filled with over 20 people.' Nigerian Irene Nwoye describes the frustration of a writer lacking inspiration while next to her another participant of the literary workshop starts typing away effortlessly from the moment the workshop leader explained the assignment. The teacher is one of international standing: Nigerian fiction writer Chimamanda Adichie, whose work has been translated in over thirty languages.

Farafina Trust, the literary non-profit organisation of the awarded author, has organised this creative writing workshop in Lagos for the fifth year in a row. It is meant for African writers - whether they are experienced or have just started - to stimulate the literary talent on the continent. 'It's essential that we Africans tell our own stories', explains Adichie.

The twenty participants have been selected on the basis of the short stories they entered - this year about five hundred authors competed for a place in the workshop. The participants are mostly Nigerian - except for two writers from Botswana - and with fourteen, women are in the majority. It is a varied group. Someone like the Botswanan Lauri Kubuitsile, a full time writer who got nominated for the prestigious Caine Prize for African Literature this year, participates just as intently as Morenike Singerr, a Nigerian law student who writes for pleasure.

Glass Walls

What they share is an admiration for the celebrated writer Chimamanda Adichie, who won the British Orange Prize for Fiction in 2007 with her novel on the Biafra War, *Half of a Yellow Sun*. 'It's a bit like meeting Michael Jackson', says participant Doris Ogale.

Her first assignment Adichie gives at the beginning of the course: 'Describe the space around you.' Irene Nwoye's dismay is quite understandable. Burgundy drapes cover the glass walls of the assembly room, in which there is not one

piece of furniture that one could not find in half a million other assembly rooms in any part of the world.

For fifteen minutes the only sound is the humming of the two air conditioners on the wall and the many laptops and palmtops on the tables on which the participants are working on their description. When the pieces are read aloud, it turns out that many have chosen the most interesting subject in the room: the people. Elnathan John for example, who is a lawyer and a writer, described in an almost erotic way his New York based lawyer colleague Olumide Owoo sitting opposite from him, while Lauri Kubuitsile concentrated on Tahira Abdulazeez' bright pink finger nails.

Adichie's approach is methodic and organised. From practising descriptions of atmosphere she moves to how to describe beauty without falling into clichés. The following days will cover dialogue, structuring text and dealing with emotion in

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words. All along she produces one liners that the entire group immediately notes down. 'The bigger the emotion, the smaller you should write about it.'; 'How to end a story? When you are done, just chop off the last sentences.'; 'One has to know the rules of fiction in order to break them.'

Playfulness

The workshop is not just about writing, but also about reading, she warns them. When she discovers that not everybody has read the short stories that were sent to them to prepare for the workshop, she reacts: 'Someone who aspires to be a writer, but doesn't read, is wasting his time.' She tells the participants, some of whom have stated that they dream of being just as famous an author as she is, not to give up their day jobs just yet. 'Sacrifices come with the territory. There is no way you can write full time and have it all. Unfortunately that's only for a handful of authors.'

Poet Gimba Kakanda remarked on the first morning that he participated in the workshop because he was looking for a certain 'linguistic playfulness'. That phrase becomes the Leitmotiv of the course. Every time Adichie mentions Kakanda's linguistic playfulness she rolls her eyes and slows down her speech, always evoking laughter among her audience.

Tropical Fish is a short story by Ugandan writer Doreen Baingana about a student

at Makerere University in Kampala who has an affair with an older white man. The story is discussed on the third day of the workshop, and it inevitably leads to a discussion about power, race, gender and money. Not everyone has sympathy for the main character. One participant finds her tone of voice so distant that he cannot identify with her, another is shocked by the matter of factness with which she undergoes an abortion when she turns out to be pregnant of her lover. A third one wonders why an intelligent young woman lets herself be used like that. The workshop leader points out that reality rarely is black or white: 'The world is full of women in abusive relationships. The woman in the story knew the guy was an asshole and that it was not a relationship, but a transaction. She recognises her powerlessness, but she goes along with it anyway.'

Manpower

Adichie also invited friends of hers, equally celebrated colleagues, to teach part of the course. After Adichie's structured approach, the two days that the workshop participants land in the hands of Binyavanga Wainaina seem like a playground. Associating freely and with plenty of humour, he discusses subjects like sex with visible delight. On his second day, the Kenyan writer arrives two hours late. 'Hangover', he explains when he pulls up his chair and sits down. 'Manpower', he then states, pouring a little bag of caramel coloured liquor in a glass and emptying it at one gulp.

Wainaina wrote the satirical article *How to Write about Africa*, of which he says to be reminded ad nauseam on occasions like these. Creative non fiction is his passion. During the workshop he argues enthusiastically in favour of this genre, in Nigeria, with its great tradition of fiction, a lot less developed than in Kenya. American writer Faith Adiele, child of a Finnish mother and a Nigerian father, also flew in to teach one of the days of the course. The participants are almost without exception academically formed, middle class and know what goes on in the world. When Adiele before starting the workshop apologises for her 'thick American accent' and says she hopes they will be able to understand her, some eye brows rise. Participant Elnathan John later writes about this on his blog *The Dark Corner*: 'This is not Masai country, I wanted to tell her. Your culture is the most exported culture in the world. Of course we can understand you!'

Confidence

It illustrates the cultural struggle of many an African writer. Often they don't write in their first language. The literary awards they compete for mostly are financed by and given out in Western countries. And when both Adichie and Wainaina mention the British Enid Blyton as a writer they read in their youth, most

of the participants can effortlessly remember the girl's books about boarding school Malory Towers.

'Growing up in Africa you read all these books that don't reflect your reality', Adichie says on the first day. According to her African writing reflects this. 'We in the so called Third World write in English in a way as if we have to prove ourselves. We think that in order to be profound, the text has to be almost incomprehensible. That shows a lack of confidence. The idea that simplicity is easy I find awful. To write something stripped down and powerful is one of the hardest things to do.'

Emezuom Nworgu, the group's nestor, is taking Adichie's plea for simplicity to heart. He has already written two books. His next work will be different: 'Nigerians like big words. In the old days, using difficult English words was a sign of upward mobility. In the future I'll write shorter and simpler sentences.' In this way every one of the twenty participants got something else out of the creative writing course. Architect Pemi Aguda discovered her talent for writing extremely short *flash stories*: she manages to say a lot in very little text. Another sighs: 'I thought I was a writer already, but I've found out here that I still have a lot to learn.' After the course is finished, electrical engineer Osemhen Akhibi notes on her blog *eurekanaija!* how she misses the daily journey on the bus from the hotel to the workshop, always having to wait for the same person who was late, and the lively conversations at lunch time: 'The workshop was many things. New friends. Self discovery. Surprises.'

The workshop continues online: <http://linguisticplayfulness.wordpress.com/>

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