

Lit Language & Literature

By Maya Jaggi

Chinua Achebe's long wait for recognition highlights the invisibility of non-western writers

THERE was a writer, Nelson Mandela recalled of his 27 years in jail, "in whose company the prison walls fell down". Chinua Achebe of Nigeria, whom Mandela honoured on his 70th birthday as a fellow "freedom fighter", was yesterday named the winner of the £60,000 Man Booker international prize. A biennial lifetime achievement award for fiction that cynics had thought designed to embrace famous Americans excluded from the Man Booker remit has again - after the initial award to Ismail Kadare of Albania in 2005 - been vindicated by a relatively obscure but richly merited choice.

The question arises, obscure for whom? Achebe, aged 76, is revered across continents as a founder of the modern African novel in English. Things Fall Apart, his 1958 debut about the devastating impact of Christian missionaries on Igbo culture amid the scramble for Africa in the 1890s, is one of the most widely read novels of the 20th century. Nor was Achebe obscure to the galaxy of writers - including Nobel laureates Wole Soyinka, Toni Morrison and Nadine Gordimer - I heard pay birthday tributes to him at Bard College in upstate New York, where he has taught since a car crash in Nigeria 17 years ago left him in a wheelchair.

Yet making the case for profiling Achebe in this paper in 2000, I was struck anew by how towering figures in world literature can fall beneath the radar in the west, or slip from memory. It

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may be worse for those not writing in English, as I was reminded by the death on Sunday of Senegal's Ousmane Sembène, aged 84, a francophone

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novelist and founding father of sub-Saharan African cinema. Hardly a household name - though, like Achebe,

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he deserves to be.

In Achebe's case, a form of novelist's block may be partly to blame. His most recent novel, *Anthills of the Savannah*,

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published 20 years ago and shortlisted for the 1987 Booker prize, came after a 21-year gap. As anti-Igbo pogroms raged, and

absurdly accused of complicity in a coup plot, he had retreated to his home state of Igboland on the eve of its breakaway bid as Biafra. Failing to avert the 1967-70 civil



war with a mission to Senegal's poet-president Léopold Senghor ("We talked about Biafra for 10 minutes and literature

for two hours"), he was, he told me, shattered. His house was bombed and his best friend, poet Christopher Okigbo, killed. It was in poetry and short stories that he voiced with moral clarity his searing disillusionment at his country's sleepwalk into war. His stand and writing inspired others, including Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, who, in an astonishing week for Nigerian literature, won the £30,000 Orange prize for fiction for *Half of a Yellow Sun*.

Yet many attribute Achebe's never having clinched the Nobel to his self-avowal as a "missionary in reverse", whose early impulse was to counter colonial myths about his homeland. His attack on Joseph Conrad as a "thoroughgoing racist" in a 1975 lecture on *Heart of Darkness* made him enemies, as perhaps did his view of VS Naipaul as a "new Conrad". Yet his calm analysis in essays of Europe's self-

serving falsehoods about the "dark continent" can be seen to have presaged Edward's Said's *Orientalism* (1978) and Morrison's scrutiny of US literature, *Playing in the Dark* (1992).

Ikem, the rebel poet in *Anthills*, says: "Whatever you are is never enough; you must find a way to accept something however small from the other to make you whole." He could be making a case for world literature, as this prize does, however uncomfortable competing narratives can be. Telling the truth, Achebe said some 40 years ago, is "the only way, in the long run, you get listened to". For some, it can be a long wait. COURTESY THE GUARDIAN

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