

INTERVIEW

Four Questions with Nzube Nlebedim: On Nigerian Fiction, Queer Afrophone Writings, and the Future of African Literary Magazines

by Sam Dapanas



Nzube Nlebedim © Onyedikachi Ottih

Nzube Nlebedim is a Nigerian journalist, fictionist, essayist, poet, and editor from Lagos. He is the editor of *Afrocritik*, and founding editor-in-chief of *The Shallow Tales Review*. He holds a BA in English Literature from the University of Lagos, and a radio journalism training from the Nigerian Broadcasting Academy. His novella *A Cry Within* was longlisted at the 2018 Quramo Writers' Prize. His works appeared in *Entropy*, *Brittle Paper*, *Kalahari Review*, *Olongo Africa*, *Counterclock*, *The Republic*, among others. He has received the Ecuador-Nigeria Young Writers' Short Story Award.

Alton Melvar M Dapanas: Nigeria is home to a dozen ethnic groups and almost 600 languages. In my country, the most privileged writers are those who write in English, myself included. I am curious about your experience as an Anglophone Nigerian writer and publisher, and how does that experience compare to your Nigerian contemporaries who write in Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo, among other languages?

Nzube Nlebedim: As many know, Nigeria's official language is English, and most writers, both established and up-and-coming, use the English language as their medium of communication in their writings. Writing in English is a choice my fathers were presented with and decided to explore. And I daresay that was the best choice, because till today, English remains the most spoken in the world. Writers need to sell their stories to those who they want to listen to them. Our experiences need to be heard, as Africans. It would thus have been an unfair choice to settle to write predominantly in, say, Igbo. We might not have made so much impact. We have then taken this foreign language, and, like Chinua Achebe advised, morphed it to our own linguistic and cultural worldview.

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Our stories are out there today, doing great things in global literature. We are telling our stories, and we are doing great at it. I believe writing is political. Telling the world of our stories is a political action. We sometimes need to make the unpleasant choices to get our voices heard, to teach and to change the world. In schools, too, writers are being taught this. To sell your work, you must speak the language everyone else is speaking. English so happens to be that language. Contemporary writers of poetry, nonfiction, and fiction in Nigeria today continue to renegotiate language to get their words across. I enjoy writing in the English language; I enjoy twirling it in my tongue and shaping it into all the subversive

moulds I want.

Dapanas: Literary historians have marked the 1950s as the beginning of the flourishing of Nigerian literature. With the rise of the ‘third generation writers,’ what is the general picture of Nigerian literature today, post-Chinua Achebe, post-Wole Soyinka? And where does your novella *A Cry Within* and *The Shallow Tales Review*, the online literary magazine you founded, stand in that picture?

Nlebedim: I think the third generation of Nigerian literature is exciting, for many good reasons. First is that this generation, of which I belong, is building on the vibrancy and the activism that was spread across, especially, in the second generation of Nigerian literature which involved the likes of Soyinka, Achebe, Nwapa, Chinweizu, and others. Now, this rung of writers is leaving behind the chants of nationalism and postcolonial discourse to interrogating the dynamics of migration as well as introspection. This introspection is what has given shape to the discourses around sexuality. Nigerian writers are “coming out” as regards their humanity. They are confronting the “taboo topics” that the former generations broached on, admittedly, but failed to humanise in their works. Contemporary Nigerian literature is exploring the failures of the state, but away from it. We are emigrating. We have moved from Lagos to the bustle of New York. We are now writing, secluded in the biting cold of Antarctica. We are making new roots, and we are writing about our experiences there. This cuts across the whole of African literature. Emigration and Queer Literatures are blossoming today. Yaa Gyasi, NoViolet Bulawayo, Caleb Azumah Nelson, Tendai Huchu, Akwaeke Emezi, Romeo Oriogun. We are telling new, fresh stories.

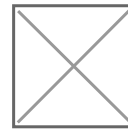
The Shallow Tales Review, and other Nigerian-born literary journals are responding to these realities. First, we have our arms opened as safe spaces for queer voices. Ukamaka Olisakwe’s *Isele Magazine* dedicated a special issue, “Queer Joy,” late last year to queer literature. Ainehi Edoro’s *Brittle Paper* has also been publishing queer anthologies for years now. The tide is moving, and we are following steadily.

Dapanas: Writing for *Afritondo*, you asserted, “The usual criticism of queer literature in Africa is in its perception as *taboo talk*” which points to the irony as mentioned by Lindsey Green-Simms that while Nigeria has “some of the most draconian laws against homosexuality on the continent,” your country also has “some of [Africa’s] noted literary voices.” But beyond the liberal politics of representation and visibility, what for you is the goal of writing and publishing queer African writings?

Nlebedim: Like I said earlier and I mentioned to friends, and in other essays I have written, this is the time to document queer literature. I called it a movement. I wonder what other goal would be greater than that: keeping history in books, in digital and print spaces, for

future writers, unborn today, to read through and understand what happened today. This movement is happening, and we can't stop it, as much as we couldn't stop Soyinka and others from writing against the corrupt regimes of the day then. Many were jailed or exiled for it. Many have been jailed and beaten and harassed today for writing about queer literatures. Many will yet be persecuted. Jude Dibia's *Walking with Shadows* laid the grounds when it was published in 2005. Romeo Oriogun's *Burnt Men* got a lot of noise. He sought exile out of Nigeria. Akwaeke Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Orji*, Tendai Huchu's *The Hairdresser of Harare*, are a few examples in Africa. Many closeted queer people and writers in Nigeria have been "outed" and persecuted. This won't stop. The vibrancy in the attempt to annul this moment is only as strong as the oppressors' belief in its sheer power and poignancy to upset something so sacred, so unknown.

Dapanas: Speaking about the future of African literary magazines in *Olongo Africa*, you emphasised that the lack of funding, support, among other capacity-building initiatives, "is an African problem." Maximilian



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Feldner, on the contemporary Nigerian literature, also blamed the dearth "of domestic criticism and African literature's orientation towards readership ... [which] explains the somewhat paradoxical situation that Nigerian literature is better known abroad than at home." Do you agree with this?

Nlebedim: Well, I cannot ever deny that the problem of Africa is largely Africans. This problem is hinged on our perspective of our own problems. The Nigerian literary structure, if there ever will be one, will do well in addressing how creative literatures produced in the country are treated and managed. It would need to set up more funding opportunities for writers, more grants, and more consistent literary awards.

However, speaking of "orientation," I will be arrogant to assume I can speak for how Nigerian writers tell their stories, or to whom they write about. No one can dictate how writers tell their stories, but a working structure can ensure that those deserving of honour get them, as well as that writers are given chances to prove themselves here without having to go out of the country to North America to pursue MFAs (which are great by the way). The government and more private stakeholders could help in making the country more conducive for creativity. With enough platforms set up, there will be less need for young, talented writers to leave and find solace elsewhere. The African literary structure could be less truant and better mothers to its children so these children, when they return all grown and successful, can give due praises to it.