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Book Review

AN ORCHESTRA OF MINORITIES

by Chigozie Obioma, London: Little Brown, 2019, pp. 528,
₹591.85 (Kindle version). ISBN: 978-1-408-71079-1.

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Reviewed by: Sameer Abraham Thomas, Faculty Associate, Centre for Writing and Pedagogy, Krea University, Sricity, Andhra Pradesh.

An Orchestra of Minorities by Chigozie Obioma is a novel that blends Igbo cosmology with penetrating emotional and psychological realism in order to present to its reader a tragedy that is at once classical and contemporary. Its protagonist, Chinonso Solomon Olisa, is a lonely, purposeless, humble poultry farmer whose life is changed when he falls in love with Ndali Obialor—a headstrong soon-to-be-pharmacist born to a family of wealth power and privilege—after persuading her not to commit suicide one night. While Chinonso finds an intelligent, loving and devoted partner in Ndali, he is impeded by her family, who disapprove of the match and who go out of their way to intimidate and humiliate him in an attempt to scare him away. Despite Ndali’s reservations, Chinonso decides to sell all his worldly possessions in order to study in Cyprus in the hope that being educated abroad may grant him access to a more respectable livelihood, and entry into the good graces of the Obialor family. However, his plans go awry when he discovers that he has been duped by his friend Jamike, who absconds with the money Chinonso gave him to pay for his fees and accommodation in Cyprus. This is only the beginning of Chinonso’s troubles; he will emerge from them physically and mentally scarred and thirsty for revenge. The novel follows his return to Nigeria and his inability to let go of the past, resulting in the destruction of everything he holds dear.

The form of the novel is particularly interesting, being entirely narrated by Chinonso’s *chi*, or guardian spirit, who seeks to explain his actions to Chukwu, the supreme deity in Igbo cosmology. By thus bridging Igbo tradition and contemporary realism, Obioma arguably presents a hybrid of the two most recognisable examples of Nigerian fiction in English—the traditionally rooted *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe, and the more familiar contemporary postcolonial ethos of the writing of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Obioma further links the past to the present through the long memory of the *chi*, capable of linking the actions of its current host to those of past hosts. This allows the author to draw parallels and create a sense of continuity by juxtaposing postcolonial, precolonial and slave narratives. Such parallel narratives offer great potential for allegorical readings, the most direct example of which is the gradual revelation of Chinonso’s past, particularly his relationship with a gosling he and his father rescued after killing its mother. Memories of the gosling are repeatedly reawakened in Chinonso at moments in the narrative that in some way parallel the specific memory in question, allowing the gosling to become a metaphor for Chinonso’s dreams, and for Ndali. Soon, every mention of birds becomes portentous, as are the *chi*’s numerous encounters with spirits, disproportionately ghosts of men whose wives have entered into relationships with other men.

Though the existence of a transcendent world of spirits and gods is reminiscent of the classics, *Orchestra* is still very much a tragedy of everyday life. Chinonso is unremarkable, even if he is supposedly rarely blessed with the gift of being able to achieve anything he puts

his mind to. Yet, ultimately, as with Greek tragedy where prophecies themselves provide the impetus for disaster to be set in motion, Chinonso's doom is the result of his decisions to attempt that which he shouldn't. And yet, even prophecy can be called into question, for he does not always attain his ends. The question arises: is this because even a blessed will is limited, whether by fate, chance or other people? Or was Chinonso's mistake giving up too early? What complicates the matter further is that the narrative includes multiple instances when chance, fate and other people appear before Chinonso at precisely the moment when he has given up all hope and suspended his actions. Such is the appearance of the nurse who offers to help him in Cyprus, and of Jamike back in Nigeria. Much as Chinonso's chi speaks of fate, his fate is undeniably the result of his own decisions. Hence, though the aim of the chi's account to Chukwu is to explain his host's actions and, by linking individual actions to circumstance, beg for clemency for Chinonso, it is clear that he cannot be absolved absolutely. Indeed, a number of subtle hints indicate that mercy may not be shown at all; for as the chi says in a different context, truth cannot be changed by embellishment.

Chinonso's life is filled with ups and downs, but unlike the bildungsroman, there is no neat end to his transcendental homelessness. Instead, he experiences cycles of homelessness and rehabilitation that are cyclical, not in a mystical sense, but rather as a consequence of both chance and individual action. Even the denouement remains uncertain: we are not informed of Chukwu's judgement; the gods remain silent while witness to human suffering. This representational choice is, if dissatisfying, also intensely realistic; reality is frequently dissatisfying. But what is disturbing is the possibility that the novel teases, that sometimes the fatalism and willingness to abandon one's loves and dreams that is associated with the older generations (as represented by Chinonso's uncle and his chi), may actually be wiser and more fruitful than the romantic refusal to abandon hope in the pursuit of happiness. Parallels may also be drawn between Chinonso's trials and the Passion of Christ (at one point, Jamike tries to get Chinonso to watch the movie of the same name). Unlike Christ, Chinonso chooses not to forgive, and therefore cannot be resurrected, that is, he cannot move on. The same may be said of Ndali, whose inability to forgive Chinonso ultimately results in her own death. Thus, Obioma offers two ethical alternatives, Igbo and Christian, to the path of resentment and revenge that leads to tragedy in his novel.

Where the novel disappoints is in its representation of women. Though there are a number of memorable female characters like the nurse, Ndali, and Miss J the prostitute, they are more often linked to Chinonso's suffering than his redemption. Where redemption is possible, it is often at least partially through sexuality, as in the case of the prostitute and Ndali. Ndali's resilience, determination, dedication and willingness to defy her family are admirable, but they only make her subsequent surrender seem out of character. Of course, Chinonso's own story warns the reader against generalising human character; the same person can be as capable of great weakness as of great strength. All the same, one may still question the author's decision to leave out a representation of Ndali's own struggle and surrender in more detail and sympathy. Given the way Obioma is able to deftly unfold the complexities of redemption, forgiveness and revenge through the relationship between Jamike and Chinonso, he might surely have done more with his female characters. Briefly, it should also be noted that the novel fails to pass the Bechdel test; the women in the novel enter Chinonso's life one by one and never interact with each other. Hence, they run the risk of being reduced to accessories to Chinonso's own struggle, though to be fair they are represented as having lives

of their own. All the same, it would have been interesting to examine these women's lives in more detail through greater interaction with and between them.

Our media landscape seems to be dominated by aspirational feel-good narratives of underdogs struggling against insurmountable odds, only to overcome them and emerge victorious in a triumph that is as much one of justice as it is of the protagonist. *Orchestra*, by contrast, is a far more grounded take, almost depressingly so; individual struggle and enterprise are as likely to lead to failure and destruction as they are to success and happiness. Arguably, this puts the novel within a certain modernist tradition. However, if, as per Lyotard's formulation, modernism entails a mourning of the passing of a golden age or unifying worldview, the novel does no such thing. While the chi often does lament the passing of the times of the 'old fathers' and their ways, it recognises the power and potential of Western modernity. Furthermore, the past hosts of the chi were themselves often either victim or witness to both senseless deaths and injustices gone unpunished, be it the result of war, sickness or the Atlantic slave trade. Rather than think of the reality of the novel through the categories of modernity (pre-, modern, or post-), it is more useful to pay attention to the features of postcolonial reality it depicts. Many of these would be familiar to an Indian reader—the juxtaposition of the cultures of the coloniser and colonised, particularly in terms of religion and language; the presence of stark economic inequality, creating insurmountable barriers of class and culture; the political problems of corruption; the allure of Europe as an educational destination, and from there the gateway to a better standard of living; the way in which some exploit this desire to defraud desperate, unsuspecting prospective migrants of their savings; the alienation of the colonial subject abroad. In all these, what is under the microscope is the inequity and injustice of the functioning of power.

Most crucially, the novel represents the plight of the marginalised as victims of structures of power. The title refers to the distinct, coordinated noise made by Chinonso's chickens when they know they are about to die. In their helpless lamentations, Ndali finds a metaphor for the 'minorities' of the world—the poor, the weak, the dispossessed—and how they are helpless against their oppression at the hands of the powerful. 'See what the powerful have done to us in this country', she says, 'See what they have done to you [Chinonso]. And weak things'. Chinonso's story thus offers a cautionary tale to the minorities of the world of their vulnerability, as well as of the dangers of an ethics of retribution that only perpetuates cycles of violence. The memory of the Biafra conflict and the many mentions of the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) suggests that Obioma is covertly warning against the politics stemming from such ethics, though this is just speculation. Either way, *An Orchestra of Minorities* is a bleak, yet beautiful tale of the limits of human endeavour in the face of unjust power structures and all too human failings.