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BIOGRAPHY

Chinua Achebe: *The Father of African Literature*

By Chuka Odike

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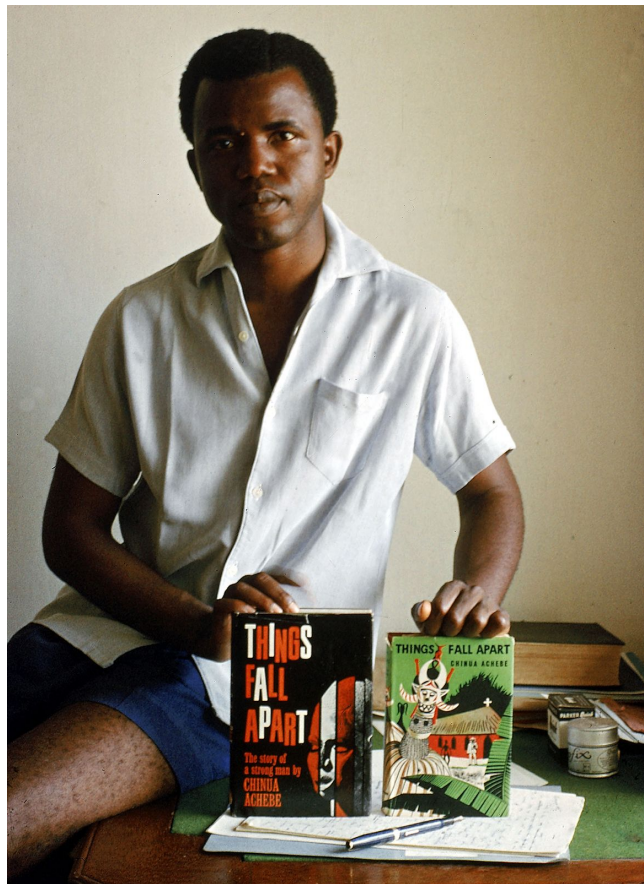
Chinua Achebe, the literary giant whose works like *Things Fall Apart* reshaped African storytelling, captured in a timeless portrait.

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CHINUA ACHEBE

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Chinua Achebe in 1960, holding copies of his 1958 novel Things Fall Apart

A quiet village in Eastern Nigeria, where a young boy's curiosity about his Igbo roots sparked a literary revolution that would echo across the world. This is the story of Chinua Achebe, a towering figure in African literature, born on November 16, 1930, in Ogidi, present-day Anambra State. His pen brought Igbo culture to global stages, challenging colonial narratives with works like *Things Fall Apart*, a novel that remains a cornerstone of modern African storytelling. Picture a man whose words bridged continents, earning him international acclaim while staying rooted in his heritage—celebrated until his death on March 21, 2013, Achebe's legacy continues to inspire writers and readers alike. Let's journey through the life of this literary giant who reshaped the world's understanding of Africa.

01

A Childhood Shaped by Culture and Conflict

Chinua Achebe, born Albert Chinualumogu Achebe, grew up in Ogidi, a town steeped in Igbo tradition yet influenced by British missionaries. His parents, Isaiah Okafo Achebe and Janet Anaenechi Iloegbunam, were devout Anglicans, but young Chinua was surrounded by the oral stories and customs of his Igbo heritage. This duality shaped him—Christian hymns mingled with tales of ancestral spirits, planting seeds for his future works. He attended St. Philip's Central School and later Government College Umuahia, where his love for literature blossomed, influenced by teachers like Chukwuma Azikiwe.

The Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970), which ravaged his homeland during the Biafran secession, left a deep mark. Achebe, then a broadcaster and writer, witnessed the suffering firsthand, losing his friend Christopher Okigbo, a poet killed in the conflict. This experience fueled his writing, turning personal pain into powerful narratives that exposed the war's toll. Despite the chaos, his early

education and cultural grounding set him on a path to global recognition.

02

A Literary Career That Redefined Africa

Achebe's breakthrough came with *Things Fall Apart*, published in 1958 by Heinemann. This novel, written while he worked at the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) in Lagos, tells the story of Okonkwo, an Igbo man whose life unravels under colonial rule. Selling over 20 million copies and translated into over 50 languages, it challenged the racist portrayals of Africa in Western literature, like Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Achebe's critique—"Africa is to be pitied, not condemned"—resonated worldwide, earning him the title "The father of African literature."

His career spanned decades, producing classics like *No Longer at Ease* (1960), *Arrow of God* (1964), and *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987). He also wrote essays, children's books, and poetry, including *Beware, Soul Brother* (1971), which won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize. After the civil war, Achebe joined the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, and later taught at American universities like Brown and Bard, shaping a new generation of writers. His refusal of the Nigerian Commander of the Federal Republic (CFR) title in 2004 and 2011, citing government failures, underscored his integrity.

03

A Life of Impact and Recognition

Achebe's influence extended beyond books. He was a cultural ambassador, using literature to reclaim African narratives. His 1975

essay, “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*,” critiqued Western biases, cementing his role as a literary critic. Despite a 1990 car accident that left him paralyzed from the waist down, he continued writing and teaching, adapting with resilience until his death in Boston, Massachusetts, at age 82.



Chinua Achebe in 2002, From *No Longer at Ease* (1960) Photograph: Frank May

Awards poured in—UNESCO’s 1999 Lifetime Achievement Award, the Man Booker International Prize in 2007, and Nigeria’s National Merit Award in 2004. In 2010, he received the Gish Prize, and his works were celebrated with a Google Doodle on his 91st birthday in 2021. Posts on Social Media platforms hail him as a “literary colossus” and “Nigeria’s pride,” reflecting his enduring legacy.

Personal Life and Philosophy



A rare photo of Chinua Achebe and his wife Christie Achebe on their wedding day in 1961. Photo credits - @multimeverse on X

Achebe married Christie Chinwe Okoli in 1961, a union that produced four children—Chinelo, Ikechukwu, Chidi, and Nwando. His family supported his career, with Christie managing his archive after his passing. A polyglot fluent in Igbo, English, and with a nod to French, Achebe's philosophy was simple yet profound: "Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter." This belief drove him to give voice to the voiceless, a mission that shaped his life and work.

A Legacy That Lives On

As of today, Chinua Achebe's influence endures. He is regarded as one of the Greatest Igbo man and his books are taught globally, his critiques spark debate, and his hometown of Ogidi honours him with a library and cultural center. His refusal of honours and focus on truth resonate, inspiring writers like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. For literature lovers, Achebe's story is a beacon—proof that one voice can change the world. If you pick up *Things Fall Apart*, you'll hold a piece of his soul, a legacy that continues to soar like the eagle of his Igbo roots.



Chinua Achebe (left) at the University of Cape Town in 2002, with Nelson Mandela. Tagged as the most expensive and iconic photo in black history, captured by Anna Zieminski.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chuka Odi

I'm a dedicated civil engineer with a passion for infrastructure development and community empowerment. With a strong background in engineering, my work focuses on creating sustainable solutions for urban and rural development projects. Outside of my professional career, I'm deeply interested in Igbo history and culture. I actively explores ways to impact society by using historical lessons to inspire and educate others about the rich cultural heritage of the Igbo people, aiming to bridge tradition and modern development.



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