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Review: The Fishermen by Chigozie Obioma

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Tiziana Morosetti

Tutor in West African Literature, University of Oxford

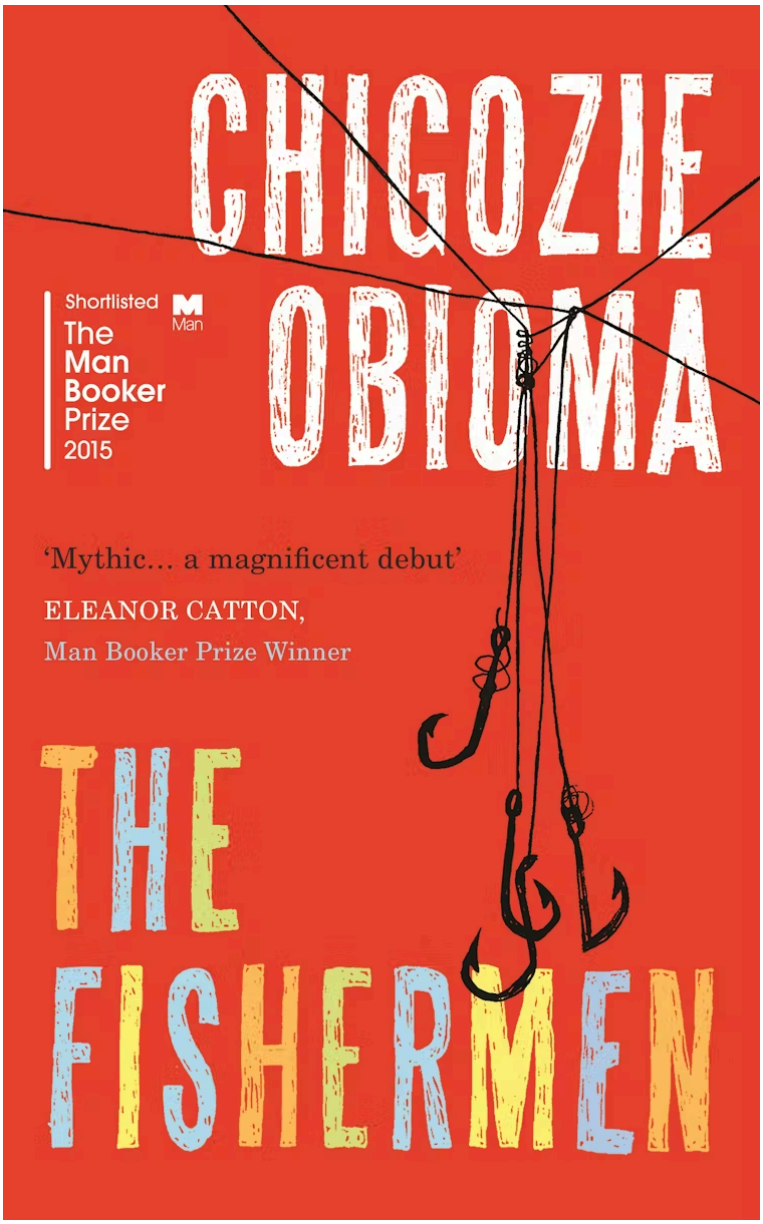
Chigozie Obioma. © Zach Mueller

The first impression of Chigozie Obioma's The Fishermen, shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize, is that of a car spluttering on starting up. The first two chapters are descriptive to the point of fastidiousness, and the characters and incidents, although ordinary, are presented almost with affectation.

This doesn't change. Obioma's language aims to be as elaborate as possible. But as the ingenious plot unfolds, reading does become pleasant, interesting, and eventually engaging. Yet it's difficult to shed that first impression.

The Fishermen is the story of four brothers (Ikenna, Boja, Obembe and Benjamin) whose lives are destroyed by an encounter with Abulu, a madman whose terrible prophecies of people in Akure, a city in south-western Nigeria where they live, have come to be held as true. The madman predicts that Ikenna will be killed by a "fisherman", supposedly one of his brothers, since they have started going fishing on the nearby Omi-Ala river. In the absence of their father, who has moved away, and under the intangible but devastating influence of the madman, the family faces a destiny as grim as it seems unavoidable, as in the best traditions of tragedy.

The novel also openly refers to Chinua Achebe's classic Things Fall Apart when proposing a comparison between Abulu as the brothers' "enemy" and the white man that the character Okonkwo has to fight. In truth, the parallel hardly stands. The madman, although presented as dangerous, is only as threatening as superstition allows. Betraying the influence of yet another Nigerian writer, Amos Tutuola, Abulu is ascribed almost supernatural powers. But it is on a defenceless man that the brothers' revenge ultimately falls, thus making the parallel with Okonkwo the more inappropriate.



This said, the impending doom is compellingly conveyed, rich with graphic detail and the extensive use of varied and sometimes beautiful similes and metaphors. Each chapter opens on a definition: the father (chapter three) is an "eagle", the older brother (chapter four) is a "python", and so on – an interesting choice that recalls storytelling techniques. The domino effect caused by the prophecy is accurately and forcefully described, tragedy falling hard upon tragedy. The picture that comes out of this is vivid, dark and haunting, the characters' psychology undergoing passionate and subtle scrutiny.

But the novel is marred by improbability (like the idea of a mother struck by bereavement and madness making a recovery in just four months) and shows some surprising inconsistencies at rather crucial moments – there are continuity problems such as characters knowing things they hadn't been told, for example.

It is in the second half of the novel that its weaknesses are at their most evident. Despite events that stride towards a powerful conclusion, the rhythm of the narration is slowed down by repetitions that are at times awkward, as when we learn that the father's "map of dreams, soon died despite how much he guarded it", and then again that "his map of dreams … was gone". The parents in particular are stuck in a destiny they do not understand, let alone able to fight against. But what the father has imagined for his children in the past is mentioned throughout the novel too frequently. Readers are reminded of lost opportunities with an insistence that gets annoying.

Also debatable is the role of the four brothers' younger siblings, David and Nkem, who, despite being presented as "unscathed" by tragedy so as to keep with the chosen metaphor of the egrets, "the wool-white birds that appear in flocks after a storm", are nonetheless variously described both during and after tragedy as profoundly affected by that storm.

It is this general search for the symbolic, with scenes designed to create climaxes at the expense of credibility, that is particularly damaging. This is the case with the rather startling moment when Benjamin, the narrator, after speculating on Abulu and his powers for several chapters and tracing back all events to his prophecy, has what is presented as an epiphany that the responsibility for all that happened may fall to no other than Abulu. Who knew?

It is Obembe that then suggests to Benjamin the parallel between Abulu and the white man in Things Fall Apart. But while it may be tempting to see the brothers' destiny as a mirror of that of Nigeria – as in Achebe's novel – one may also wonder what the audience for this parallel is. Obioma has declared The Fishermen "a wake-up call to a dwindling nation", and yet, when the Harmattan must be described as "a season when the dry dusty wind from the Sahara desert of northern Nigeria travelled south and covered most of sub-Saharan Africa" it is doubtful whether it is Africans (let alone Nigerians) that are being addressed here. This is a very internationally aimed work.

All in all, The Fishermen is a highly ambitious novel and makes for interesting reading. But despite having some of the ingredients of a remarkable work, it suffers, heavily, from its very own cleverness.