



**CHELUCHI ONYEMELUKWE**

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## **Cheluchi Onyemelukwe, Monday Writer, 16 November 2020.**

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## About Cheluchi Onyemelukwe

Cheluchi Onyemelukwe is a writer, lawyer and academic. Her short stories and essays have appeared in literary journals, most recently, *Entropy* and *Johannesburg Review of Books*. Her first novel, *The Son of the House*, was published by Penguin Random House, South Africa in 2019, and by Parrésia Publishers in Nigeria in 2019. It is forthcoming from Canada's largest independent publisher Dundurn Press in May 2021 and a UK edition will be published by Europa Editions in 2021. An Italian edition will also be published by Europa Editions.

*The Son of the House* won the Best International Fiction Book Award at the Sharjah International Book Fair. It has been called 'beautifully written and intimate... an incredible first novel' (City Press) and 'powerful and intimate ...worth every star and more' (Sunday Times) and 'storytelling at its finest' by Artslink.

Cheluchi holds a doctorate degree in law from Dalhousie University, Canada and a First Class degree in law from the University of Nigeria. A leading health law expert in Nigeria, she is also the author of *Health Research Governance in Africa: Law, Ethics and Regulation* (Routledge, 2018). She has written widely on health, gender, and law.

## The Monday Writer Interview

### Cheluchi Onyemelukwe

in Conversation with **Nnorom Azuonye**

**In an interview by Arun Kakar in *Spear's*, you made this statement; *“If we say it is the son that carries on the name, then it’s of course the son that gets to make sacrifices to the gods. Eventually, it’s the son that gets to be the priest and it is the son that gets to become president of Nigeria.”***

**Surely with people like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Lola Shoneyin, and Chika Unigwe, just to mention a few women breaking down walls and proudly doing so with their maiden names, people must be thinking differently. Do you think the belief that sons are the ones to carry on family names is still strong in Nigeria?**



Interesting question. People are thinking differently to a degree, and I think I make that clear in the interview that you reference. The question as I point out, is whether or not that is changing as fast as we think. So, to answer your question directly: that view is less strong than it was before. However, this is a question of degree and is still largely dependent in part on where you live, the exposure one

has to other cultures and ways of thinking and on migration, and how strongly moored one is to culture. Social media also is doing what only migration could do in the past, including holding a magnifying lens to the achievements of women and to other ways of being, so that is a factor as well. Thus, it is of course much less strong for people living outside Nigeria, and even by degrees less strong for people living in urban areas, increasingly detached from the cultural mores of ‘home.’ That said, the central importance of a son is less prevalent but by no means completely gone.

At any rate, one needs to take a broader view of these things, and in thinking about the changing mores consider not only how well women are doing, (and I don’t mean only those you reference, but also beyond literature but economics and finance and law including our Dr Okonjo-Iweala), or even the central place of sons, for example, but other related issues. The good thing about the accomplishments of these and other women is of course that it showcases how much women are capable of. But the other side of things is that this is not the

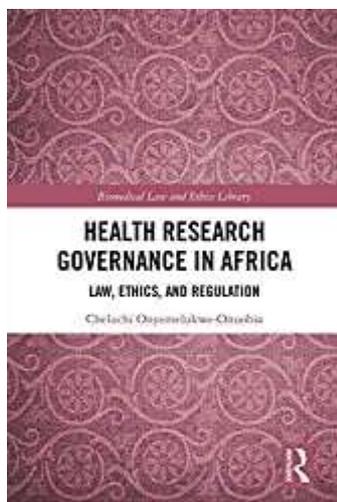
entire story either or perhaps even half of the story. I know this as a woman in Nigeria and from work supporting women in domestic violence and in sexual and gender-based violence and doing work on women's inheritance rights. There is still a long way to go, for sure.

**It took a long time for the United States to elect a female Vice President Kamala Harris. Do you think a female Nigerian president is a possibility in our lifetime?**

Nothing is impossible, and that is the lesson from the Vice-President Elect Kamala Harris's emergence. The patriarchal nature of our society makes it seem difficult. But when I remember the young women from the #EndSARS movement, and how many men put up that iconic picture of Aisha Yesufu on social media, we have to be optimistic and imagine that we can leapfrog through the processes that the US has gone through. I am currently involved in some advisory work on women's political participation in Nigeria. There are certainly issues that need to be addressed, including in the ongoing constitutional review, including entrenching helpful aides such as affirmative action in our Constitution that would be helpful in creating the fertile ground for this to happen and reviewing the current concept of 'federal character' and expanding it to address other issues of concern such as but not limited to gender.

Beyond the active work that we need to create the enabling environment, we have to have the active imagination that those young women from #EndSARS movement triggered and ask ourselves as women and men: What really stops us from voting for women candidates or candidates that are outside the norm?

**Most people know you for writing *The Son of the House*, but you wrote another important book; *Health Research Governance in Africa: Law, Ethics, and Regulation*. What is the state of health research in Africa, especially Nigeria today?**



Thank you. *Health Research Governance in Africa* is an important book especially as we continue to consider clinical trials in the context of COVID-19. Health research is growing but is unfortunately way less than we need it to be. During the COVID-19 pandemic, one of the questions that has arisen is how much our scientists are contributing to finding the cure or a vaccine for COVID-19. I explored the challenges of access to COVID-19 vaccines and cures, patents and the possibilities for traditional medicine in a forthcoming journal article.

In part, it is a question of commitment – understanding the benefits of research, doing long-term thinking and creating the policy environment for health research (and I am talking quite broadly here) to thrive and be utilised. We need to fund more research. There is really no getting around that. While most of our health challenges could be solved with a clearer vision, a shoring up of ailing health systems and improvements to access to health care, and to the social determinants of health, we need to improve our record on funding health research and then employing the results of that research whether it is in policy or in developing actual solutions. To do that, we need a commitment to research, public and private universities and research institutes to be properly resourced, and we need individual researchers to be able to access research funds. We have over a hundred universities and research institutes, but they are underutilised. With our openness to aid, clearly identifying our priorities is another critical matter. This will help us insist that even foreign-funded research aligns with our needs. We have policies such as the National Policy on Health Research 2016 that state these things, so I am not saying anything particularly novel, but we have failed to specifically address health research over the years.

The inadequacy of funding also has an impact on research regulation, research ethics and governance for the protection of persons who participate in research. Although ethics review is now entrenched in Nigeria, for instance, resources tend to be limited for effective monitoring of ongoing research amongst other things. All in all, we have a long way to go. But I suppose you could say that for many other areas of health.

**You also wrote *Providing Access to Generic Antiretroviral Drugs to People Living with HIV* published in 2004. Are people living with HIV in Nigeria actually accessing treatment as there is still, sadly, a lot of denial and stigma surrounding HIV and AIDS in Nigeria?**

Yes, people living with HIV in Nigeria are accessing treatment. Stigma is reduced from the early 2000s when I wrote that piece for my masters in law, but stigma and discrimination remain rife than they should be with all that we now know about HIV and with the number of persons living with HIV in the country (estimated at 1.8 million). We have come some way from a legal point of view - [\*Discrimination on the basis of HIV status: An analysis of recent developments in Nigerian law and jurisprudence\*](#) as I wrote about this in an article on the state of the law on discrimination on the basis of HIV status. But in practice, there are still employment and other types of discrimination. Stigma also means that not enough people are open about their status, with implications for treatment uptake, transparency in relationships, help-seeking and knowledge of status.

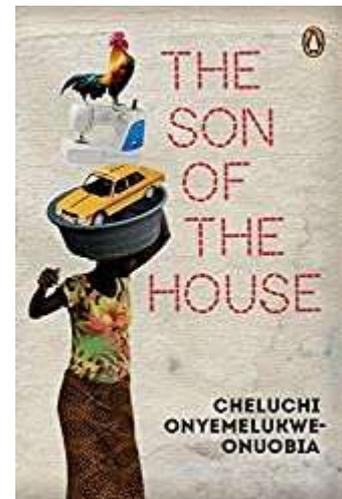
## How did you make the transition from academic writing to fiction?

I would not call it a transition. I have almost always done both since I finished my first degree, with less attention to my fiction. I wrote short stories and the beginnings of novels while I worked on my doctorate. With the publication of *The Son of the House* and now working on my second novel, I continue to do academic writing. The main struggle for me in this respect is time.

I have always been a reader and my first career ambition in life was to tell stories and write novels ever before I conceived of studying law. In general, I am told that I am quite the storyteller in my everyday life, and I think that that is the way I make sense of the world. I write my journal articles, do technical advisory where much of what I do involves writing and I write fiction, and they are all separate things and require different techniques I suppose, but which do not interfere with one another. Yet they are somewhat connected in storytelling for fiction or storytelling for how the law can or should change in addressing gender or health issues. So, they are different things in my head when I do them, all related to something I enjoy – writing and storytelling.

***The Son of the House* opens with an experience of kidnap victims. Kidnapping is a growth industry in Nigeria and your narrative indicts the society and even the police. Do you think enough is being done to combat the crime of kidnapping in Nigeria?**

No, we are not doing much. That much is clear to anyone. As with many institutions in Nigeria, there is need for extensive reforms in the security policing institutions, but this requires a change of orientation in leadership – a leadership that wants to address that most fundamental of issues – security – and leave a legacy but also much else besides. Much has also really changed in the value system of Nigerians as the economy has suffered over many years, and money has become elevated above everything in a manner that continues to worsen. There is enough blame to go round, of course, and I do not absolve the actors who kidnap, murder and extort, nor do I seek to minimise the valuing of criminality and its proceeds over human life and an apparent lack of values. However, I think that if we had leadership for whom security was priority, all the other issues could be tackled.



**I agree completely with your assessment. Still on *The Son of the House*, the characters, particularly Nwabulu and Julie are very well developed and believable. Tell me a little about how you researched this book and modelled your characters.**

The kernel of the story came from a moving story my mom told me in 2011. I knew I had to write about this matter. However, as often happens, the stories of Nwabulu and Julie took wings and painted a much bigger picture than I had imagined and created these almost solid people. To write *The Son of the House*, I read quite a bit about the Igbo and marriage, asked questions of older persons in my family etc. I also drew on real life environments to shape the characters. It was really important to me that the characters were believable, not contrived and that people could imagine that these people existed somewhere, sometime. I have been especially thrilled that this has been the experience of most readers, especially those who come from my part of the world.

**I admire your control. Your novel addresses many gender issues without being a feminist manifesto. In your opinion, how has *The Son of the House* contributed to the conversation about gender equality and violence against women?**

Thank you for your words on control although I can imagine this question raising its own question about what ‘control’ means and whether or not a ‘feminist manifesto’ has any negative connotations. I prefer the word ‘nuance’ because I wanted to capture the realities of living here, in the world I described.

**I admire feminists and would never put their work in a negative pile. As a matter of fact, my BA thesis was titled “The Burden of Feminism and Social Change in the Plays of Tess Onwueme” which explored and praised the importance of feminists’ activities in helping drive forward a paradigm shift in our society. I did mean control because the issues you raise do not drive too much attention to themselves at the expense of your art and the entertainment value of your novel.**

There are burdens on women and men. In many ways also, there are privileges that men bear and areas that women have suffered much disadvantage which has tended to pit even women against each other. I did not come to this book with a front and centre agenda, though this is of course not to say that I do not have agendas. My work in academia, the non-profit sector, and other areas would certainly say otherwise. However, I came to it to tell realistic and credible stories reflecting what I knew, what I had seen because I believe that a focus on ‘story’ would free my readers to come to their own conclusions about these women, humanity, and a myriad other issues such as issues of class while still providing

the enjoyment a novel should. This is more effective I think than putting agendas before anything else, although of course it can be argued that there can be different effective approaches.

*The Son of the House* makes a contribution to the issues from that point of view. In the conversations I have had with both women and men about *The Son of the House*, I think this idea that our humanity is crucial comes out strongly – whatever issues we have with ‘gender equality’ or ‘feminism’ and that this must necessarily reflect in our relations as women and men in the world.

**Your novel has been widely reviewed. I don’t know if you read the reviews. Is there something you would have liked people to note about the book that even your most perceptive reviewers have so far missed?**

I have read a few reviews, and thankfully, they have been by and large positive. I imagine with the UK, Italian and North American editions out in the coming year, there are likely to be many more reviews. I would say that there is much focus on the gender issues and perceived feminist undertones by several though not all reviewers. And, to be quite honest, in my view there are things I pick up when I go back to *The Son of the House* – the role of parents and background in shaping us, issues of class, the place of history, even music etc. That said, people will take from the book what they will and, to be quite honest, while I may not always agree, I have found many perspectives interesting and intriguing.

**Who are your writing influences and what is the one novel you have read that you keep returning to and why?**

This is always a difficult question. I read widely and have little or no limitations so long as the writing is in a language I can read – African, Western. I believe that all of these have influenced my writing to varying degrees. That said, I am deeply sentimental about Achebe. Lately, I have been marinating in books by Hilary Mantel and Rohinton Mistry, and I think that speaks to my predilection for historical fiction.

**Thank you, Cheluchi. I first spoke to you about interviewing you for Sentinel in April 2019. I am sorry it has taken this long to get around doing this.**

I am happy we got to have the interview. I have followed Sentinel since around 2005 and it is an absolute pleasure to appear here. I thank you for your continuing support of Nigerian and other writers. Better late than never – though writers are always cautioned about clichés, lol. [SLQ](#)

## Excerpt from *The Son of the House*

I liked the way my father confided in me and entrusted responsibility to me. It made me feel close to him. And so, although I had a deep love for my brother, taking care of him was special because it was something I could do for my father. And I knew this was something important to Papa because, after my brother, my mother had three more girls before her womb seemed to shut up shop, thus leaving my brother an only son for several years. Only sons could carry the family name, could make sure that the name of the family did not get lost.

‘See, your name is Afamefuna,’ Papa would say to my brother. ‘Your other name, Ugonna, the one who will bring honour to his father, carries a similar weight. I have not failed my parents. I know that you will likewise not fail me, not fail the honourable name of our family. And when the time comes, you, and your brothers, should it be God’s will to send us more, will carry on the great legacy of our family and pass it on to your own children.’

Afam, diminutive for Afamefuna – ‘may my name not be lost’ – that was my brother’s name. When more boys did not come along immediately, the name became even more significant. His academic strengths and his growing height boded well for the responsibilities that rested on his shoulders. His penchant for fun and frivolity did not.

My father would call him for special sessions on our family history. Whenever possible, when I had no work to do for Mama in the kitchen, I would slip outside to listen. We would sit on a mat in front of the kitchen, Papa cleaning his ear with the tip of a cock’s feather and our mother peeling egwusi, the darkness lit by the glow of the hurricane lamp and the moonlight. The bright light of electricity would have disturbed the intimacy of the evening; over time, in Umuma, hurricane lamps gave way to kerosene lamps and only occasional electric lights, and then to rechargeable lamps, and then to noisy generators.

My father had a lot of stories, and his deep voice was filled with spellbinding emotion – by turns joyful, sad, angry, but never passionless. Sometimes, it was about adventures in foreign lands, like the war in Burma. Other times, it was about our family. How our ancestors had worshipped the old gods, and how our father, one of his father’s two sons, had run away from the ichi ceremony. Igbu ichi was that painful branding and scarification of the face, which formed lines that crisscrossed on the forehead. In those days, it was done to sons of noble families, starting with the eldest, to distinguish them as members of the prestigious society of Nze na Ozo, a society of men who upheld truth. The hot iron seared into the forehead while the young man, in a show of the strength given him by his chi, bore the pain with only occasional short grunts.

Papa had joined the Catholic Church, risking my grandfather’s grave displeasure. As an adult, it occurred to me that he might have considered priesthood had it not been for the family traditions and the need to ensure that the lineage went on. Papa’s own father must have done much etching and imprinting

of custom, of family pride and history. For Papa was a staunch Catholic, but also a firm believer that family lineages must be continued. As we grew up, he often said, as frequently as he could find a child to listen, that we should know where we came from. He would often say, 'I am a Christian. But one has to protect one's legacies. That is one's heritage. Otherwise life becomes meaningless and vain, as the wise author of Ecclesiastes says.' He would pause and look intently at Afam, who always looked past him. My own eyes always stayed on Papa's face, drinking in his words and stories of who we were.

'By joining the church and getting an education,' he continued, 'I brought light to my family. It is the duty of each new person in the line to bring something good to the family, to keep the family going.'

I was proud of my father's contribution to the family line. When farming and old titles were becoming things of the past, our family stood in the new world as respected people – catechists, teachers, headmasters, civil servants, politicians.

'Do you understand what I am saying to you?' my father often asked Afam when he ended one of his stories, peering at him through the dim light of the hurricane lamps.

My brother would say yes, although he had been pinching me in the dark, playing, not taking my father too seriously, trying to get me to do the same.

'That's my boy,' said my father, approval and love on his stern face.

I would make a better son of the house, I sometimes thought. But what fell to me was not carrying on the family name but ensuring that the one who was to do so succeeded.

(Buy *The Son of the House* from [Amazon.co.uk](https://www.amazon.co.uk))

“The Monday Writer Interview: Cheluchi Onyemelukwe in Conversation with Nnorom Azuonye” ©2020 Nnorom Azuonye & Cheluchi Onyemelukwe.

Nnorom Azuonye is the author of *Funeral of the Minstrel* (a play), *The Bridge Selection: Poems for the Road, Letter to God & Other Poems* and *On the Record: Conversations with Writers & Artists* (12 July 2021, SPM Publications)

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