

## Definitions: What is an *African Writer*

An *African writer* is not just someone who has black skin and mixes alphabets to create words on paper. As an African writer, I am someone who belongs to a civilization of people with peculiar experiences that have challenged our environment and continent, Africa. As an African writer I am the product of a history of hybridization—the mixing and matching of foreign and indigenous cultural values, which I reflect in my art. TRACY NNEKA NNANWUBAR

An *African writer* is one who is originally from Africa, writing literature that explores the sensibility of the African people. Someone who understands the relationship between the African oral tradition and culture and how that tradition is the foundation of the African thought even though much of Africa has been colonized and corrupted by westernization. I am an African writer first before anything, and have always known myself to be. I see the world through my Africaness, the sensibility of our being, and I am guided by that in all that I write. PATRICIA JABBEH WESLEY

In its most benign form, it is nothing more than a geographical description. I do not think that the designation *African Writer* carries with it any of those totalizing implications that it once did. The relative disaster of the post-independence African experience has more or less put paid to the pressure to write the nation's pageantry and given us all a little pause. African writing today is so diverse and varied that it is futile to attempt to define or prescribe what it should be and what African writers should be writing. ANDIAH KISIA

I have had to decide that *African Writer* is a meaningful term, or shall be, in order to move on to more desperate and fruitful subjects. But the questions linger: do we as people who inhabit or hail from the continent have a

sense of ourselves and each other, do we have shared beliefs, and are they unique to us so that *African* means something concrete and useful? Is an African someone static, stuck in a certain moment or place? Can we be Africans if we live or have adopted elsewhere? What is our language? Are we legitimate *African writers* if we write in languages not native to the continent, can we be relevant to ourselves or others if we do (write in native languages)? Is our work valid if our writing is somewhere in between languages, places and cultures? It is important to have a box to tick that people recognize, even if they do not understand it. I hope that being in this box means I may also expand it. NEEMA NGWATILO MAWIYOO

When I am described as an *African writer* in contexts that tokenize or exoticize me, I challenge the term and the generalizations implicit in it. In other situations, where African voices and experiences are marginalized or silenced, I might claim the title vigorously to assert authority and open the space. SHAILJA PATEL

I believe an *African writer* is any writer either of African descent or who has some connection to the continent. This includes naturalized Africans and people of African descent who might be living in other parts of the world. Personally, I am proud to be identified as such, although I believe the publishing world has built a misconception around such writers. For some reason they have been portrayed as less developed and even juvenile. It must be the reason why their books are often found at the little shelf towards the back of the store. However, I have always drawn immeasurable courage from being considered an underdog in any contest. I strongly believe that some of the finest writing, music and art can only come from the very cradle place of mankind, which is right here in Africa. We have far much more to offer the world than hunger and wars—if only the west will stop labeling us and interfering in our affairs. STANLEY GAZEMBA

In fact, I believe that the main characteristic of the *African writer* is to be a freedom fighter. Because of the history of the African continent in gen-

eral, he has successively been fighting against political tyranny, colonialism, post-colonialism, imperialism, inequalities, poverty and indifference. To this extent, I believe that African literature is one of struggle. It is often highly political and very engaged. There is a growing tendency now to be much more anchored within the local, to find roots much deeper within respective societies, and this is a way to better face the rest of the world. Thanks to this redefined identity, African literature is less and less a dialog with the other, as it has long been the case, but more and more a discourse with one self. And for me, this is the main step towards liberty. ZED HOUNDETE

Labels are given to everyone, some wear them faithfully and with much grace, but it is pointless if they mean absolutely nothing and make no difference to the world we live in. Some of these terms are social constructs; as a being I am much bigger and not as simplistic as that, it is sometimes a struggle to merely refer to one as an *African writer* or a *woman writer* or a *black writer* or a 'lesbian writer' because at once you may and can live in a multiplicity of spaces that contradict each other, so I am careful not to lock myself in categories that I, myself, don't really understand. It is sufficient to just say that I am a writer. KITSO-YAME KGABOESELE

I ignore the term *African writer*. I write. Among other things. Full stop. Place myself as far away as an Indian ocean speck of sand is from disgraced Pluto's fifth moon. YVONNE ADHIAMBO OWUOR