

## **Books Review**

### **Titles:**

- (I) So Far Away: A Collection Of Poems (2014, 178 Pages)**
- (Ii) Eyes Of The One Who Loves (2015, 142 Pages)**
- (Iii) Where Two Roads Meet And Other Poems (2016, 232 Pages)**

**Author: Obiorah Momife**

Publisher: Lampstand Books

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### **Obiorah Momife and the Sojourn of Garlands in a Tempestuous World: A Review of *So Far Away*, *Eyes of the One Who Loves* and *Where Two Roads Meet* by Obiorah Momife.**

Poetry and its uses as the record of the mores of a given society is an activity that the human has engaged in since the evolution of language as a way to express thoughts and feelings. Poetry existed as an oral art from pre-historic times before it's reduction to writing. Even as a written form of art, it has had a very long and distinguished history right from *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, regarded as the earliest great literary work to have survived to this day, down to poetry produced by our post-modern 21<sup>st</sup>-century poets. In its long journey of traversing cultures, milieus, and environments, of expressing the thoughts, feelings, and ideas of humans, and of promoting the mores, attitudes, and culture generally of a given people, poetry has maintained its pride of place. And the poet has always enjoyed

an elevated status in the society. Certainly, Poets are intellectuals, and by their manipulation of language can say the bitter and crude thing in such a manner that they somehow manage to get away with it and with their lives.

Poetry has always been part of the different cultures that make up the African continent. In these cultures, poetry was expressed more in oral forms. G. G. Darah gives a summary of how poetry, in an oral form particularly, manifested in various cultures across Africa, from the perspective of its use as a satirical instrument (15-27). What comes out, however, from Darah's discourse, is the importance of poetry in those oral societies.

With the advent of literacy, written poetry also came into being in Nigeria. Nigerian writing and writers in critical essays come into generations. In this vein, Sule Egey locates Nigerian writers within three generations which he tags first, second and third generations. Macaulay Mowarin, on his part, looks at Nigerian poets within modernist and post-modernist phases in the first instance. He then goes on to talk of a new assemblage of poets beyond the post-modernists who, according to him, "were born at the dawn of Nigeria's independence" (125). To this group can also be added poets born after Nigeria's independence.

Macaulay Mowarin also quotes G. M. T. Emezue who views the new generation as poets who lament. According to Mowarin, Emezue clothes them in the garb of the biblical Prophet Jeremiah because these poets "lament the betrayal of political leaders and the dilapidated state of the Nigerian nation" (125). They cry out against injustice in varied forms; they cry out against a system that refuses to function to the betterment of the citizens, they cry out against self-imposed leaders who seem to delight in inflicting maximum discomfort and injury on their coerced followers. Obiorah Momife belongs to this generation.

The three books under consideration here persuasively epitomize the spirit of lamentation. This statement might appear to contradict the title of this discourse, the first part of which reads "Obiorah Momife and the Sojourn of Garlands in a Tempestuous World." A word that sticks out clearly in the above title is *Garland* which means a wreath of flowers, leaves or paper worn as a mark of honour, or

as an ornament or hung as decoration. A wreath, by the way, is also used as a memorial to decorate graves. Looked at in this broad context, Garland could portend something happy or sorrowful. And this garland sojourns from place to place as the world continues to be turbulent with alarming frequency.

Perhaps it would be instructive to start our foray into the texts under consideration by trying to give a personality to who a poet is. On this, we do not need to go too far as we can find adequate insight into who a poet is by listening to the poet and poetry in discourse. In the collection *Where Two Roads Meet*, Obiora Momife has a poem titled "Before the Mirror" in which he presents his view of who a poet is and what they do. In a portion of the poem, he says

*They are akin to historians  
 They record for matured minds  
 The pleasure, the pain, dreams and pictures  
 Of times in verses, in words only the deep fathoms.  
 They also know the past, the present  
 Most times forecast the future by the spirit of the letters.  
 Poets are sober, reflective, universal in orientation and  
 expression  
 The world is their mirror, though they stand in a space in  
 their locality  
 Poets dream dreams that come alive  
 Poets see visions ... (226)*

And in the collection *Eyes of the One Who Loves* is a poem titled "Do Not Judge a Poet" in which Momife appeals to the reader not to judge poets because they are usually not held down by the strings of race, ethnicity, religion and the negative aspects of love and hate. That the poet sees people as people, questions things objectively and looks at them from more of a spiritual rather than a real perspective. The poet, therefore, is akin to a healer, a teacher, a guiding light, a beacon that points out the way for a society to regenerate itself and find its path to enlightenment and progress for the generality of its citizens. Our poet Obiorah Momife attempts to do all of the above through the writings contained in the three books under discourse.



The first of the offerings is titled *So Far Away: A Collection of Poems*. It is a 178-page book published in 2014 by Lampstand Books. This book is divided into three parts which contain 138 poems. Obiorah Momife opens this collection in part one with an entry simply titled "Poetry." In this poem, he lays the foundation for the discourse in the book and invites the reader to open their eyes and unlock their ears to receive nuggets that are in his words "on saintly sojourn for noble hearts." The bibliophile, thus, prepared, explores the different poems that come in varying lengths, textures, spirits and that convey messages that should appeal to all manner of persons.

Part one of this collection contains a potpourri of works that address different subjects. Three poems pay tribute to three notable world figures: Mother Theresa of Calcutta, Dim Chukwuemeka Odimegwu Ojukwu, and the irrepressible Dr. Chuba Okadigbo. The poet celebrates their lives, their achievements and the impact they had on the society and holds them up as moral examples for the rest of humanity. In the same breath, he inserts a poem titled "Mirror Image" that embarks on the search for a mentor, a mentor that is selfless, firm, caring and truly inspiring even as he laments the apparent difficulty in locating such a person in our present generation. The poems "Stargazers," "Mendacity," "Men in Black" and "Prayer Point" are centred around the same themes: deceit, oppression and corruption. They paint a picture of people who would do just about anything to fulfill their selfish and evil desires.

In part two, Obiorah Momife tackles mainly political issues. Indeed, in this segment, the poet comes out as a prophet. Although he wrote these poems some time back in our recent history, they speak more to us in contemporary tones. They address issues that currently bedevil the Nigerian state and people: from deceit and empty/impossible promises by politicians through the masquerade performances that they enact by way of campaigns, the gullibility of the average Nigerian, the Niger Delta problem and general issues concerning the shaky contraption called Nigeria. A contraption in which jungle justice seems to hold sway, a contraption in which we gleefully murder our bright and promising stars then dubiously

claim they are heroes while working to prevent them from being immortalized.

Part three of *So Far Away* contains poems that celebrate love which manifests in several forms: filial, erotic and agape. Beyond these, we have melancholy, despair and hope as parts of and products of relationships. Then, of course, the love for money and material possessions that lead to greedy acquisition. A poem that stands out in this part is "First Fruit" in which the poet celebrates his first born child Somtochukwu Ifunanya Momife. The celebration and hope espoused in that poem seem to overshadow the grim situation that the other poems thrust at the reader. The cases of unrequited love, in loveless marriages, in the plight of the common man, in the selfish greed displayed by parliamentarians, in the folly of mindless acquisition and the rape of the Nigerian state are palpable. The part three, as it were, opens up further the dislocations that can be found in Nigeria and builds these images up to a fantastic crescendo with just a tiny glimmer of hope for a better tomorrow.

The second collection *Eyes of the One Who Loves* is a 142-page book published in 2015 by Lampstand Books. This collection contains 98 poems. One thread that runs through most of the poems is love. The poet persona is either giving love, is not getting love in return, is angered by love, is trying to see love in people, is seeking to sow love in the society, is deceived by love or sees complications manifest because of love. Love can, therefore, serve either good or destructive purpose depending on how it manifests or how it is handled.

As part of his show of love, the poet pays tribute to three icons: Albert Chinualumogu Achebe, Gani Fawehinmi and Nelson Mandela, all of the blessed memory. He holds them up as persons who had lots of love and did all they could to better the lot of their people in their various ways. They were transparent in their love and neither possessed nor displayed some of the dangerous tendencies associated with the personas in the poem "That Silent Moment" for example, who are more of wolves in sheep clothing. In a sense, these are characters that beguiled their lovers/admirers who were so taken in by such fake displays that they did not realize

they were dealing with representatives of the devil. To take four lines that do not necessarily follow each other as an illustration:

*You were so thrilled and so blinded  
To know you walk with a wild wolf  
...  
Her schemes, looks captured your folly  
And messed it up in evil veiled as a rose (115)*

Love, in this way, can destroy even as the one being destroyed thinks he/she is being loved.

This collection *Eyes of the One Who Loves* makes a passionate appeal for love to be re-examined. For people not to push love forward as an excuse to perpetrate evil; for transparency in our dealings; for steadfastness in our display of love and for the just expression of anger if we find love threatened because it is through these that our society can attain the heights that we desire.

*Where Two Roads Meet and Other Poems*, released in 2016 is the third collection under discourse here. This collection is 232 pages in volume with 164 poems and is also published by Lampstand Books. This collection contains poems that deal with interconnections, allusions to sojourns, roads and how people, attitudes, elements and situations intercourse with one another, in the process producing offsprings that are sometimes benevolent and at other times malevolent.

The opening and closing poems in *Where Two Roads Meet* are spiritual in outlook, one projecting the life of Jesus Christ as a model to be admired and emulated while the other offers thanksgiving to God for sustenance and for hitting gold in the jubilee year of existence on earth. In between these two are poems that highlight the hollowness in connections that are not made with altruistic intentions. Juxta position is a mechanical device used here as in the poem "Ask Me Not" that put side by side cowardice and courage, stupidity and smartness, listening and speaking and hate and love amongst others. Through the juxtapositions in this and other poems, connections are exposed, and one can examine the conjugations to determine the paths that they are travelling. Are they journeying



through paths that would lead to good or ways that would result in unpleasant situations? The question the reader may ask these poems, to a large extent, can provide some illumination based, on the path that the reader is also travelling.

Politics also takes centre stage in this collection *Where Two Roads Meet*. Poems such as “Acid-Rain,” “Body Language,” “Music Just Dey Waste Dey Go” and “Aphrodisiac” capture very eloquently the current political realities in Nigeria. In these poems, we see how the craze for power makes politicians promise the unattainable, to turn into all kinds of masquerades prancing about and deceiving themselves that they are performing magical feats on stage in an attempt to woo the voter. The poems also show how they try to rule, albeit unsuccessfully, through the power of an indefinable and ungraspable phenomenon called body language, and how they embark on vendetta rather than concretizing the extravagant promises made while bleating like bucks in heat that must do whatever it takes to conquer the does i.e. female goats.

The poet does not just lament about the situation of things in Nigeria and indeed the world. He proposes ways in which such ugly situations can be prevented or at least ameliorated. In poems like “The Balanced Mind,” “Another Life,” “Pain of Sacrifice” and “My Heart Condition,” the poet enjoins the reader to cultivate a right mind free of bigotry and bias while endeavouring to make asacrifice for the wellbeing of others and taking criticism in good faith.

As with the other works, in this collection *Where Two Roads Meet*, Obiorah Momife pays tribute to Frank Ugiomoh, one of those that impacted positively on him and contributed significantly to making him the person he is today. Tributes such as this help to encourage those who mentor the young to keep up the good work and contribute to bringing about a greater tomorrow.

These three books contain some of the most pungent poems penned by any poet that belongs to the present generation of Nigerian writers. They are witty and engaging just as they inspire the reader to take steps to change the prevailing decadent situation that presently confronts us. They are soul searching and display the ability to probe various depths of consciousness that are sometimes surprising and sometimes familiar. They decorate the mind of the

reader with garlands that Obiorah Momife proudly carries as he sojourns to different spheres of human existence: dousing flames, adorning heroes, laying wreaths at the gravesides of the gallantly departed, inspiring the downcast and generally holding the garlands as beacons that can help to conduce a more genial and beneficial society for all.

In all, we can say that Obiorah Momife has painstakingly worked his way into the pantheon of gods that decorate our romantic firmament. A heavenly construct from which rain that contains wisdom, instruction, philosophy and beacons in the form of poetry fall freely to water seeds that would germinate to serve as guides to present and future generations.

As we wind up this discourse, may we present an excerpt from one of the pidgin English poems that define the character of Obiorah Momife's poetry. This poem titled "Frown of a Goat" is taken from *Where Two Roads Meet*. A portion of it reads thus:

*Life na roses and thorns, e good and bad  
Sometimes na jolly, sometimes na suffer suffer  
You no go receive good and no receive bad  
The better life na to teach us to laugh and dance  
The suffer suffer go teach us to thank God and to think.  
To think of life so we go go get better sense  
And not to murmur and complain like locomotive  
Wey dey climb hill with engine wey don die finish,  
Smile my bros no be your own worse pass. (34)*

In conclusion, we can say that in Obiorah Momife's poetry, we find that the eyes of the one who loves looks so far away and sees that place where two roads meet. What exactly does he find happening there? To find out, you would need to get hold of these three collections and delve into the fascinating world of twists, turns, insight, despair and hope that they contain. Perhaps the reader would find a path that would lead to a better world for them.



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