

## BOOK REVIEW

### A Way to Die

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*Author: Obumneme Ezeonu*

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The collection of poems by Obumneme Ezeonu opens with a poem titled “Nobody Knows My Name” being a poem he dedicated to the late American novelist, James Baldwin. This poem fumes with profound sincerity needed to re-examine the worth of contemporary living in Nigeria. The poetic style lends itself into the nature of phobia that characterizes present-day Nigeria. It seems for Ezeonu that life is that inner pathos occasioned by a nameless memoir on earth. The poem seems to suggest that when living is jeopardized by anonymity, individuals are compelled to resign inexorably to drunkenness, self-pity, agony or desolation. These translate to a process of dying. Here Ezeonu is haunted by this dangerous feeling of dejection in the face of rejection. He wishes posterity to celebrate his nameless renown much as they (posterity) should reminisce his obscurity in a world characterized by injustice and inequality. Moreover, his poems underscore the potentials and limits of activism and social justice which perhaps epitomizes his personality as someone “halfway between militant and writer” (Bleiker 2000: 273).

The second poem titled ‘A Way to Die’, dedicated to Late Dim Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, seems to reinforce the irony of life using simile in a very productive manner. There is a creative interweaving of paradox and aphorism that elicits such a biting spontaneity in the reader. A note of ambivalence in the poem seems to mark Ojukwu as a hero whose life and exit were constituted by reckless denials, discredit and unresolved conundrums. Quite undoubtedly, unresolved conundrums are recurrent factors in this book seen especially in such poems as “When we run amok for wealth”. This poem feels the pulse of a contemporary moment where the pursuit of wealth would eventually extinguish the passion and fire of

gainful living. The poem paints a gloomy picture of the Nigerian state in a highly suggestive manner. It seems to suggest that we can never live to embody the good in man if we continue to run amok for wealth. When Ezeonu pours out his stream of cascading thoughts into the canvas of our grieving emotions, he leaves no stone unturned. He scribbles these painful graffiti on the walls of our heart, forcing us to shed blood as tears. But we never did. This is because we seem to have imbibed that ambivalent maxim of Fela's "Suffering and Smiling".

"Suffering and Smiling" (p.15) is the third verse of the poem "Unemployment" and it paints an ever-ambivalent picture of today's Nigeria: sublime yet dangerous, painful yet enjoyable, ugly yet beautiful. It is eminent that most Nigerians can approach so much suffering with such serenity and peace of mind. Indeed one can state that Ezeonu's paradoxical use of language in "suffering and smiling" invokes a world that is both genuine and tactless; an astonishing and audacious work of metaphor in which the limits of being a Nigerian are brutally interrogated and rewritten.

It will be pertinent to dwell more critically on the title of this book, "A Way to Die." The American poet Hart Crane dived from a passenger ship and drowned himself. His last words: "Good-bye, everybody." For Crane, a way to die is to wave goodbye to depraved humanity before a suicide mission. Certain individuals have died more fatally or more peacefully but it is instructive that Obumneme Ezeonu captures the drama of death in his poem, *A Way to Die*. However, it seems that the only verse in Ezeonu's poem that addresses something close to the deadly excesses of Crane is "some die like a reverberating echo, receding but heard." Crane is the reverberating echo that receded yet heard. His works demystify death in that logic: he is physically absent yet commands imposing presence through his works. I would rather add to Ezeonu's verses that "some die like unsung heroes, who have bidden farewell without a word." Crane fits into this verse.

While Crane exposes a way to die, other great individuals have pronounced the nature of ways to die. For example, in the last words of the Scottish Physiologist, Dr William Hunter: "If I had the strength to hold a pen, I would write down how easy and pleasant a thing it is to die" (Bleiker 2000: 273). Hunter's declaration, no doubt, casts dying as a gratifying process which individuals should embrace without apprehension or fear. If Hunter deploys words to moderate death and mollify its ominous characterization then it means that life itself could be

a systematic collection of words needed to moderate severe human conditions. It means that words could be used to weave thorny life into malleable robe of gratification. Or that words could also be deployed in binding blissful living into hard resin of immutable sorrow. This later version, in my mind, is exactly what Ezeonu's *A Way to Die* does in this collection. Therefore this collection encapsulates the tragedy of life, the folly of struggle, the acme of sorrow and the irony of fate. While a few poems deal with joys of living, a good majority dwell of melancholia and despondency as the current blight of Nigerians' psycho-social consciousness.

What strikes one with admiration are the sheer finesse, skill and ingenuity that aggregate in Ezeonu's poetry. He gives us so much to rest upon, so much which communicates his disenchantment and cynicism with the contemporary society in Nigeria, especially through a solemn kind of emotional engagement that solicits our entire devotion. His collection is replete with a prognosis of danger, a lamentable feeling, a menacing outcry of emptiness and eternal damnation.

Pablo Neruda, a former Chilean diplomat, called for an "engaged poetry, one that speaks not only of love and beauty, but that is also permeated with a profound concern for social justice, for the impurity of the human condition" (Ibid, 273). Indeed Ezeonu's commitment to the cause of social justice is unquestionable from his words:

The world is spinning on its head  
 Buoyed on a mind gravely led  
 This roaring wind blows nobody well  
 But we've got a franchise from hell  
 Abomination has come to stay  
 Evil ways are back from holiday....

In a time when the minds of average Nigerians are pervaded by a disheartening euphoria and a psychology of resignation, it is instructive that Ezeonu's poetry can serve to envision and re-vision a new form of socio-political life, one that weaves collective crises into an urgent poetic intervention.

Roland Bleiker observes that poetry began as a form of speaking that revolved around rhyme and other regularities (273). In this regard, one can argue that the rhythmic and rhyming elements of Ezeonu's poetry seem to fulfil the function of social and moral memory. This, in

my mind, is what is needed to maximize our likelihood of remembering and transcend the commonly perceived Nigerian syndrome of collective amnesia. In actualizing this task of remembering, one notices that this stylistic component of rhyme marks Ezeonu as a serious and active producer of meaning from non-meaning. To a large extent, Ezeonu deviates from the reigning trend of free verse which has seemed to arrest the attention of the younger generation of poets and which casts them as inactive writers who neither want to labour nor sweat.

In his continuous exploration of the imageries of violence, another poem titled *Pandemonium in the North* captures the increasing insecurity in Northern Nigeria. Ezeonu declares thus:

I see sorrows, tears and blood...  
Hunger and starvation  
In the North.

This is a political poem as much as a poem that mirrors the poetics of (in)security. For quite some time now, Northern Nigeria has been embroiled in severe terrorism and insecurity championed by the Boko Haram sect. In recognition of this, and given his other haunting thematic such as “What the Madman of Umunachi Said (2)”, “My Life is a book”, “Death of an Uncle”, “Unemployment”, among others, it is most befitting to describe Ezeonu’s poems as mementos of a national mess, loaded with heavy burdens of tragic events and armed with the yoke of political mis-governance. It is most remarkable that in “Unemployment” despite the fact that Ezeonu “has lost his dreams again” he exhibits a heroic defiance of extraordinary faith. Ezeonu writes:

I trudge home in despair  
Clutching my fate  
A bunch of diplomas  
That evades the eyes of luck

Suffering and Smiling  
I hear the sound of Fela  
Lifting my spirits  
Beyond the agony of another lost day

The personification of providence is seen in “the eyes of luck” and powerfully used to understudy the illicit abuse of office in Nigeria: a place where struggle does not survive on the platform of integrity, professionalism and meritocracy. Instead the use of “luck” serves as

a tactical and ostensibly political language euphemistically shifting the real causes of unemployment. One would rather not want to believe that “a bunch of diplomas” would consistently “evade the eyes of luck” if excellence were not sacrificed on the altar of mediocrity.

In the poem titled “Life is very much like a poem,” we see a deft interweaving of personification and simile. Here, life becomes a feminine gender that compares to a poem; a poem that is itself “short and poignant,” “immortal,” “humorous,” “emotional,” “beautiful,” to name a few. The powerful use of simile in this poem seems to drain the last drop of optimism in our pool of hope. This construction rather becomes a metaphor that problematizes the link between conviction and hopelessness. Either in “Ziena, child of destiny,” or in “Unemployment,” or in “A way to die,” we see how simile is deployed to capture the complex occurrences and even inconsistencies and contradictions in the poet’s life. These are, however, accepted as the poet’s effort to make sense of certain socio-political phenomena in Nigeria.

In Ezeonu’s work, modern poetry’s subversion of realism is given a tangible exigency reminiscent of what the French philosopher, Henri Lefebvre, describes as “a false world” (1991: 5). Ezeonu’s poems connect us with the impressive promises of social realism, the pathos and struggle of daily life, and the grand betrayals of governance that pretends to ‘democratize’ us. In “The Infidel” Ezeonu mocks the pretensions of religious bigots, exposes their hypocrisy and delusions, but always returns to the struggling, human voices of the misled and dispossessed.

“Memorabilia,” “Abominations has come to Stay,” “Death of an Uncle,” “Here I Lie,” “The Lingering Hope,” “After Death,” “The Infidel” all invoke a certain poetic modernity that enables us to address the jaggedness – the corruption, the insecurity, and death – that is central to our structural, economic, and psychological reality. However, while “Memorabilia” recognizes the hidden fatality of a death that lurks by the corner of every vibrant life, “Death of an Uncle” ponders the vile with which apocalypse stifles the very strength of struggle. While “Abomination has come to Stay” mourns the blatant impunity of acculturation and globalization, “Here I Lie” bemoans the wasteful remnants of temporality. Yet if the exegesis of death is revealed in “After Death”, “The Infidel” only reflects the violent and

fundamentalist relations leading to death itself. If we must insist on understanding the process of dying better, then we may be compelled to believe Sylvia Plath who says: "Dying is an art like everything else, I do it exceptionally well." Now considering Plath's position it means that each of us does dying exceptionally well, especially if we believe that living is a process of dying. However, it does seem that "The Infidel" rejects the existential interdependence of faiths, problematizes it and promotes a new politics of religious irresponsibility and injustice.

Ezeonu strongly believes that even in the midst of all these terrible happenings that:

Nothing weird under the sun  
Can frighten my feet to run  
Nothing strange on earth  
Can make me hold my breath (p.14).

This is an audacious pronouncement and a confident assertion that may lead us to query the other side of Ezeonu's personality. This other side flickers with a dim glow of optimism in such poems as "I am love," "The jilted lover," "I choose Knowledge." Therefore, in conclusion, it would be quite unrealistic to dismiss Ezeonu as a cynic or one with a crestfallen heart. While his weebegone lyrics might serve as emollient tonic for the already downtrodden, he, at the same time, allows confident songs to interject his deep psychological melancholia. Ezeonu seems to believe that one needs to mitigate the harshness of life with the ebullience and passion of brotherhood. In this vein "Tattoo girl" and the likes interrupt the macabre undertone of the entire lyrics drawing us to a conclusion that life, for Ezeonu, is a poem where the good, the bad and the ugly wrestle for verses and stanzas.

## References

Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life: Volume 1, Introduction*, J. Moore (transl.), (London: Verso, 1991).

Roland Bleiker, "Editor's Introduction" *Alternatives*, Vol. 25. No.3. 2000: 273.