

Mma and other Poems

Joy M. Etiowo *Mma and other Poems* Lagos: Handel Books 2006.

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Mma and other Poems is a maiden collection by Nigerian scholar Joy Etiowo. The collection of 27 poems reflects the sensitivity of the new generation of African poetry in their manner of clear, lucid expression and the lyrical sensitivity of their poetry.

Beginning on a trepid note, the subject matter of poetry testifies to its dampening impact on the poet's feeble sensitivity at the early encounter. It brings forth the image of a bather on a cold harmattan morning by the side of the local stream trembling and fearful of the initial plunge.

Your rhythms frightened me
And your rhymes stiffened my nerves
...
You made a rumbling in me
At every point of our contact (13)

Etiowo encapsulates the sublime triumph of essence over precept at the point of her early encounter when the confusion that 'frighten(s)' and 'stiffen(s)' her nerves becomes, much later with the bold plunge into its depths, 'a nourishment' of self and a 'discovery' of channels of imagination which the 'assemblage of words' offers both the creative writer and her listener. Symbolically it is the triumph

of essence of poetry over the precept that arise from its exercise.

Today you are the channel
Of my imagination
You are the tinder
That ignites in me
A burning passion for assemblage of words

In a universal sense, *Mma* may be read as a tribute to souls that stand on 'bended knees' humble and submissive before the sublimity of creation.

You are the ground under my feet
...
You are the comfort under my knees
...
In the valley you lift me high
On the mountains make me a haven (34)

Likewise on the particular, it marks the a dedication to many years of fruitful service through life's transitional phases offered by the major inspirer of Etiowo's verses, the great 'Mma Teacher' herself for whom,

The chalk and the board
Scrubbed with charcoal and herbs
Shines in its blackness (24)

This honour includes other 'hero(es)' who by their legacies prod us to reflect on our affinity, no matter how distant, with their rare existence, and the natural sense of loss that come with our final separation from them.

You are mother of great kings
And men who trod the land
Obol Omini Bassey...(35)

Mma poems may not have come from intent to correct perceived notions as the one among many expressions that challenge the aesthetic and cognitive appeal of the individual in the community. Touching communal base such as can be evident in these poems often does not fail to take in its sweep the political environment. In this case modern Nigeria offers the spatial particularity from which the centre revolves through other equally valid dimensions of life. Here we are reminded of the three Rs in 'The Cry' that are part of the Nigeria's national monuments of 'dreams destroyed'

Thirty five years have gone
There are still the cries
Of fathers killed
Of mothers laid
Of children stolen
Of property leased (17)

But as the product of the visioning is not desensitised in bashful memories, there is a balance of feeling which gives one the satisfaction that our poetry can be temperate even as 'we decry/...our obsession(s).' Thus even as

dogs have their meals
in silver plates
and humans beg
for unequal portion (15)

we can celebrate friends that wipe our 'tears of lust and pain/sharing

(our) mat of sorrow.' We can dedicate our hearts to icons like Inah-Aki, Onen-Joshua, Ikpi-Willie and even the great Mma herself who is mother of not only one but all those whose paths had crossed with hers in the inspiring course of her exemplary life.

It also affirms the conviction of our generation that our poetry comes through in the greater feeling, an often neglected aspect neglected, that is, by its subjection to theoretical preconditions of human creativity lost at times in the pursuit of labyrinthine dissociations by and to the delight of many academic schools. We probably owe our romanticism—if the appellation may be tolerated—to the constant renegotiation of the emotive capacity over and above the confused modernism that would becloud the creative expression for an artist who dares not take it with no more than the deserved pinch of salt. Here, African poetry returns to its primordial roots as both the art of teaching and the pleasure of expression for both poet and readers alike.

As a maiden attempt Joy Etiowo's *Mma* is an encouraging work that one can only hope will earn further mention when the rougher edges of her craft with, perhaps, some other sequel or addenda to these burgeoning repertoire.

Editor's note:

The preceding was taken from an Introduction to *Mma and other Poems* by Chin Ce