

Book Review on Dike Okoro's Letter to Aisha and Other Stories

Benjamin Kwakye

Author & critic

Nigerian-American writer Dike Okoro's first collection of short stories possesses the spirit and rage that captures the social milieu of modern Nigeria and postcolonial Africa. Although it charts its own course, this collection masterfully mixes realistic and speculative in the mold of Ben Okri. It opens with "Letter to Aisha", an epistolary tale driven by nostalgic recollections of childhood by two women, the protagonist Aisha and her bosom friend Moji.

"But let us be thankful to ageing. Idris is a good man. Our country is proud of him. Gone are the days when he used to sing the Pro Africanist anthem of Africa for Africans. I guess his stay in the Colombian landscape has imposed on him the many facets of cultures quilted in the exotic fabric of Latin America. I remember the love letters he shared with you which you sent my way. Cherish them all, I remember reminding you. And never give way to grudges in your heart. As for the love child's saga, I will keep

praying for you. As you may know, life throws its surprises at us sometimes. And the good thing about it is not one's immediate reaction but how one handles one's self in the middle of the storm," says Aisha, encouraging Moji to endure the harsh realities of marriage that she's facing.

The story beautifully illuminates the southern climate of Port Harcourt, Nigeria's garden city, and is embellished with poetic language that paints treasured moments of childhood. Perhaps this story follows in the tradition of the *Buildungsroman* and challenges the reader to keep up with the assortment of themes and details that converge in making the tale itself an exceptional narrative.



The religions of Islam and Christianity are covered in an engaging way that informs the reader on how people of the city lived in harmony irrespective of religious affiliation. Okoro's familiarity with the society he writes about illustrates his keen power of observation and attentiveness to veracity.

The greatest effects of Okoro's stories lay in their gripping display of pictures reminiscent of city life in Africa. In "The Cross Bearer" an innocent is picked up and detained by the police who deploy their abusive antics to get him to confess to a crime he knew nothing about. The irritated man fails to hide his loathing of the unfair treatment he

receives. Written in the first person, the story illustrates the frustration most city dwellers experience when dealing with impatient officers of the law whose anger at their job situation, in this case a police station where stifling heat assaults officers, among other agencies indirectly implied in the story, makes a sensitive reader to empathize with the detained voices in the cells who rage at the men in uniform:

"After a short while an irritated voice cursed from the cell behind the front desk: "Stupid officers! God go punish all of una for not giving us food this afternoon!" Another voice with a measure of anger added: "Officers, I wan shit o!" More and more insults and complaints piled up from the cell. The afternoon dragged on. The heat in the station exacerbated. I was soon handed a paper and ordered to write down my name, address, phone number and details of the crime that led to my arrest. I drew close to the attending officer and told him I didn't understand why I had been arrested in the first place. "Look here, young man, I am not here to play games with you."

The carceral experience, especially as it pertains to the activist prisoner, is cleverly reflected in "Mene's Song," a story that metaphorically links the fate of an imprisoned Nigerian journalist to the travails the Ogoni environmentalist Ken Saro-Wiwa experienced before his death. Okoro employs wit and stark realism as he captures effectively the environmental and psychology state of the detained man. The references to "smoking pipe" and the name "Rex Cardinal Lawson" and "highlife" music, for any

reader familiar with Nigerian history, instantly particularizes the experience captured. There's also the indirect reference to the international community, as regards the cry for human rights support. Nevertheless, the detained journalist's hopes for his country never diminishes but is even made more pronounced in the Okoro's description of his last hours:

"Mene sat on the cement floor of his cell, knees drawn close to his chest, paper on his knees, stump of pencil between his wet fingers, and laboriously printed his last written words:

*Even in the hours
When the call for verse
Cheated the singer,
The cry for the homeland
Remained his song."*

Usually, consistency of tone and mood can be hard to sustain in a collection of short stories, but that is precisely what Okoro deftly achieves in *Letter to Aisha and Other Stories*. He is among those rare writers who are able to invoke trust and calm assurance in their readers based on the strength of their writing. Okoro's accessibility and conversational tone often beguiles the depth of this work and the panoramic range of his artistic perspective.

The eponymous story, *Letter to Aisha*, which leads the collection of seventeen well-crafted stories, is written with such empathy and grace that it easily enchants and

endears itself to the reader. It is at once a celebration of friendship, as Moji, a Christian, writes a wistful letter to her Moslem friend, now that they are both grown women with different preoccupations. This love letter of sorts is a celebration of what is possible amid differences in a nation (and indeed continent) still bedeviled by religious and other internecine conflicts. Of course, it will be grave injustice to dwell too much on this one story, for in this collection, Okoro's dexterity and range is on ample display.

Some of the stories are to be treated as pieces of a mosaic, needing no neat ending but forming part of a beautiful whole. Such narrative beauty is reflected in stories such as "That "Amen" and the troubles of forced neighborliness, "Mene's Song" and its opening of the sutures of calm to reveal the military oppression present in Port Harcourt, and "Rosemary", in which a university student doubles as a sex worker. After reading these and other stories such as "Night Lesson", the power of description draws readers in so deeply that they feel as if they have ridden with the characters on an okada to a buka to partake of a great meal of jollof rice with goat meat or pounded yam and egusi soup. Then there is the phantasmagoric feeling common in African folktales in stories such as "A Generous Gift" and the style of such folkloric storytelling in "The Greedy Farmer". One can almost imagine him- or herself at the feet of a wizened grandparent dispensing the wisdom of the ages.

After the last story is read, Okoro's keen eye for human behavior, kaleidoscopic range, and humor prompt an urge to reread these beautiful stories again and again. Okoro situates himself among the captivating storytellers of his country and continent, such as Okri and Achebe.

Reviewer: Benjamin Kwakye was born in Accra, Ghana. He is the author of three books of poetry: an epic poem, *Scrolls of the Living Night* (Cissus World Press, 2015), and the collections *Soul to Song* (CWP, 2017) and *Songs of the Jealous Wind* (CWP, 2018). His poetry has appeared in *We Have Crossed Many Rivers: New Poetry from Africa* (Malthouse Press, 2013) and *For the Women in Their Lives* (CWP), edited by Tanure Ojaide and Dike Okoro. He is the winner of two Commonwealth Prize for Literature Book Awards for his novels *The Clothes of Nakedness* and *The Sun by Night*. His other literary awards include the 2011 IPPY Gold Award for Adult Multicultural Fiction. Kwakye is also the author of other novels, a novella collection, and a short story collection. He attended Dartmouth College and Harvard Law School. He is the director of The Africa Education Initiative, a non-profit organization dedicated to promoting science education in Africa.

Author: Dr Dike Okoro, **Sam Walton Fellow** and finalist for the 1994 **Iliad Poetry Award**, teaches advanced reading and writing poetry and literature courses at Northwestern University, Evanston, USA. He received his PhD in English (with research specialization in African Diaspora literatures) from the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee, an M.A. in African American literature and an M.F.A. in poetry, both from Chicago State University. He is the editor and author of six books, including *Speaking for the Generations: An Anthology of Contemporary African Short Stories*, *Echoes from the Mountain: New and Selected Poems* by Mazisi Kunene *A Long Dream: Poems by Okogbule Wonodi*. His poems, essays, short stories, chapters and articles have appeared in numerous journals and anthologies.

Get Your Book Reviewed

If you have a book review on a book, send it to us. We will publish it free. We don't charge any fee for publishing. The quality of your article will decide whether your article will be published.

If you want us to review your book, we charge for this. We have a good number of review writers with us. We have different review writers for books of different genres. Our reviews are gaining recognition among the publishers, journals and academia for fair and high quality reviews.

Write to: [clrijournal\(at\)gmail.com](mailto:clrijournal@gmail.com)

[Contemporary Literary Review India](#)